神様のメモ帳7
杉井 光
イラスト＊岸田メル
電撃文庫

Kamisama no Memochou - Volume 07

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クリスマスが近づき、探偵事務所のそばにあるホームレスと公園の改装工事が始まろうとしていた。そんなある日、事務所にやってきた依頼客は、なんと見り出しやのアイドル歌手。子供の頃に失踪した父親そっくりのホームレスをその公園で見かけたのだという。
父親捜しの過程で浮かびとがる、エアポケで武装したホームレス狩り集団、そして、なぜか探偵助手を離脱する少女。
「これは自分ひとりでかたをつける」
やがて――事件が加えるも、僕が探偵助手として体験した中で、最も奇怪なあの事件が……戦慣のニートティーン・ストーリー、第7弾！

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神様のメモ帳7

杉井光

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杉井光

1979年、東京生まれ。超優の年と来届でいっぱいいっぱいになってきたので、そろそろ本格的な仕事環境を整りようかと画策。買いそろえるものは本棚とキーボードとタブレットとゲーミングパソコンと電子ドラム。と考えたところで気づく、仕事増になってない！

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イラスト/遠田メル

1982生まれ。イラストレーター、エロ同人誌、ライトノベルの挿絵や、ゲーム、アニメのキャラクターデザインなど、趣味はネット漫画です！好きなもってます！
ホームページURL http://mago.jp/

カバー・口絵印刷所/凸版

神様のメモ帳7
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イラスト※岸田メル

Characters

ミンさん

ニート探偵事務所があるビルの1階に店を構えるラーメンはなまる店主。アリスはじめニート探偵団の面々を生温かい目で見守っている。

アリス Alice

ひきこもりの自称《ニート探偵》。PCとぬいぐるみで溢れた自室で、ネットを駆使して真実を暴きだす。普段はいつもパジャマを着て、栄養の大半をドクターペッパーから摂取している。

彩夏

ナルミのクラスメイト。とある事件で重傷を負い、記憶を失ったものの生還を果たす。明るく素直な性格だが、どこかすれてるところも。

藤島 鳴海 Narumi

本作の主人公。転校を繰り返し人付き合いを避けるようになっていたが、とある事件をきっかけにアリスの助手となる。なにごとにもやる気がなさげなニート予備軍だが、口八丁だけは一人前。

平坂組 Hirasaka-gumi

いまどき任侠を気取る不良少年グループ。しかしその実力は侮れない。

四代目

平坂組リーダー。冷徹な性格だが、趣味特技が手芸という隠れた一面も。ナルミと義兄弟の杯を交わしている。

電柱

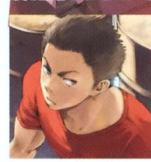
平坂組、四代目麾下のツートップその1。組の中では縦幅最大。

岩男

平坂組、四代目麾下のツートップその2。組の中では横幅最大。

ニート探偵団 NEET Detectives

アリスのもとで合法・非合法を問わず捜索活動をするニートな野郎ども。



テツ先輩

元ボクサーで荒事にたけた武闘派。その一方、パチスロや競馬などに精を出すギャンブル狂。

ヒロさん

女のもとを渡り歩くヒモ。卓越した話術でたくみに情報を引き出す（ただし対女子限定）。

少佐

童顔で小学生にも見えかねない外見をしているが、盗聴・盗撮・爆発物のエキスパート。

Designed by Toru Suzuki

Alice in Santa Costume

Yui Natsuki Sings Christmas Song

Take me to your heart Feel me in your bones Just one more night,
And I'm comin' off this, Long & winding road

I'm on my way, I'm on my way-- Home sweet home...

"Home Sweet Home" Nikki Sixx

Chapter 1

Having lived for 17 years, I lost a lot, but never did I once thought of myself as unfortunate. Those things that hurt me were all failures I caused, damage caused by my bones piercing through my skin, caused by me scratching my parched throat. These aren't considered misfortune. What really forces people down the abyss of misfortune is something more realistic, a flaw in reality that renders people powerless. Simply put, it's money, health, and the loss of family.

That 17th Winter, I spoke with quite a few homeless folk.

"Some call us wanderers, unemployed, or beggars. Some stand up for us, saying that those are words of prejudice, that we should be called street buddies."

One of the homeless ones said to me.

"But I think calling us 'homeless' will be the most accurate in this case."

He pinched the cigarette that's as short as a fingernail, staring at the smoke as he mutters.

"There's also those without a house, but that doesn't refer to us."

"What's the difference?"

He rolled his sleeves, showing the red pellet marks on his arms. Those were the scars caused by the BB bullet attacks.

"Whether we have a home or not, we don't have a place to go back to. Those brats are the same. That's why they can only wander the streets at night, and shoot us with the air guns. I really want to beat them up really good, but I can't say that I don't understand the feelings of those brats."

"You…understand?"

"Of course. The part that they have no place to return to."

That's what it means to have no place to return to. His mutter vanishes into the cigarette smoke, drifting with the wind to the metal fence

opposite, crushed by the incoming train.

I could not imagine how it felt to have no home to return to. It was because we have a place we belonged to that us NEETs could easily give up on ourselves and run away, lost and not knowing what to do. For those who lost the place they belong to, what environments do they enter dreamland, and what are the scenes they see in the dreams?

“It’s not that hard. That’s just all.”

His voice sounded as though it came from a distant place.

“It’s just that we have no place to return to. That’s all.”

I recalled the words of my employer, the detective when we first met, what she said to me.

Just as earthworms do not fear darkness and penguins are not ashamed of their inability to fly. That’s the meaning of life, is it not?

At that moment, I could not answer.

Early Winter, everyone was busy preparing for the change in weather, and even the NEET detective who heads in the dark, server room that had air conditioning blowing all day long was no exception.

A certain day after school in late November, I received an order from my employer to head to Tokyu Hands and some electronics shop to purchase a large amount of stuff before heading to the office. The office’s a fair distance away from the bustling area near the station, located at the 3rd floor of a building crammed with all kinds of shops. One of the doors had the display ‘NEET Detective Agency’ on it, and that would be my workplace. No matter the season, the air-conditioning would always be switched on, and once I entered the corridor, I felt my nose would crash into something cold. The 6-tatami sized room beyond that was crammed with computers and all kinds of gadgets. The three walls were filled with shelves of cases, monitors and cables that reached the ceiling, and the place was way beyond cyberpunk, almost a religious place even. However, the most eye-catching thing was the petite girl in pajamas seated at the center of the bed.

“Watch the windows; don’t let a single flea jump in. Put up 3 layers of soundproof curtains, and amplify the speakers! Play Haydn’s Oratorio [1] all day long, make sure it’s loud enough for the brain cells to shrink!” The girl continued to command me on the bed. She has sickly white skin, black hair that flows like a river at night, and was dressed in teddy print pajamas and white socks on her slender legs. She’s my employer, Alice.

“Hey, why must you lock yourself in that much?”

I asked as I pasted duct tape at the narrow space behind the shelves.

“Why? You ask? I’m a NEET.”

Alice proudly lifted her chest as she answered.

She declared herself as the NEET detective, and would rather keep herself confined to this cramped detective agency than to head outside due to her fear of doing so. But what’s the reason for her being so wary?

“Tomorrow’s November 23rd. Got to increase the thickness of the wall.”

“So I say, what’s November 23 about?”

“It’s Labor Thanksgiving Day tomorrow, of course! That’s when everyone start praising each other wildly, the day where NEETs are robbed of their rights to even breathe.”

“Ahh…” Labor Appreciation Day wasn’t some major festival, so I often forgot about this vacation.”

“Us NEETs end our year on this very day, so we have a duty to spend this most important day praying, like the Jews celebrating the Passover. After enduring this Labor Appreciation day, the next day will be a new beginning.”

“Stop enduring and express your thanks to the laborers.”

“Shut up and get working!”

Yes yes, but it’s way too much of an exaggeration to say that it’s the end of a year. The moment I had such a thought, *you’re an idiot*, Alice gave me such a look, and said,

“What’s exaggerated about this? You’re the one being ignorant. For

the Japanese, Labor Thanksgiving day is supposed to be a festival to celebrate the end of a year."

"Really?"

With duct tape in hand, I turned my head around.

"The reason why November 23rd was chosen as the Labor Thanksgiving Day was due to it being a Royal Family festival, the New Rice Tasting Festival. As to why the weird name of Labor Thanksgiving was given, it was because the Allied General Headquarters after the war wanted to lower the Royal Family's Shinto influence."

"Rice Tasting Festival…" I seemed to have heard of it, or not.

"Simply put, when the harvesting season ends, that's the Rice Tasting festival. Even someone as royal as the Emperor himself can't taste the rice harvested this year before this day. Using the Lunar calendar, most of the time, the New Rice Tasting festival is around winter or so. That's why the timing of this festival is as implied as its name, a New Year festival. It's also an important festival for Japan, so dependent on the harvesting of rice, to celebrate the end of a year, and the beginning of a new one."

"Haa."

"So us NEETs have to stay still and not do anything for the entire day."

"You don't work at all for the entire year anyway."

"Who do you think gives you your pay!?"

The following day was November 23rd, and naturally, there was a school vacation. I was summoned by Alice early in the morning, and I rode my bicycle to the office.

Alice's room was located in a building with many shops, and at the first floor of the building was a ramen shop called 'Hanamaru'. The owner's a young woman called Min-san, and before she inherited the ramen sop, it was said that she was aiming to become a ice cream maker, so her ice cream was of professional standard. Even till this day, she has been researching on it. The ramen shop

enjoyed a rare holiday due to the Labor Thanksgiving Day, but the electricity in the kitchen was in use, and the ventilation fans were spinning as there was a sweet fragrance coming out from the back door. It looks like Min-san's busy making ice cream this year.

"Excuse me.."

I opened the back door and sat on a round seat. Min-san, with her hair tied in a ponytail, turned towards me.

"Oh, it's you, Narumi. You're early today."

Min-san said as she placed the bowl she was holding onto the table. On this day, Min-san wasn't wearing a tank top, just a sarashi wrapped around the breasts, and I didn't know where to look as a result. Like usual, she's really defenceless. This lady with G-cups should at least know that just wrapping a cloth around her large chest will show a huge cleavage that'll really garner attraction.

"The ice cream isn't done. You can come by at evening."

"No, I'm not here at 10am in the morning just to eat ice cream."

"You came to help too, Fujishima-kun?"

A girl with short brown hair suddenly popped her head out from the kitchen corridor. She's Ayaka, my classmate, an employee of this shop. The ramen shop's closed today, but the boss and employee are both here, and I really don't know for what purpose they're closed for. The only thing different is that Ayaka's wearing a purple one-piece dress. I guess Min-san has no interest other than making ice cream.

"I'll go to Alice in a while."

"Why do you have to go to her at such an early time?" Ayaka tilted her head in scepticism as she held onto the blender.

"Ah, because it's Labor Thanksgiving Day, right?" Min-san said. "Oh yeah, thank goodness we have Narumi starting this year."

"What about Labor Thanksgiving Day?"

Min-san started to explain to Ayaka how on this day, Alice would shrink up in a corner of the room or on the bed and not move at all. She typically would not eat much, and would rely on the potent

carbonated drink Dr. Pepper alone as nutrition, but on this day, she would not drink any. Thus, she would end up as a living corpse, and for every trivial matter, she would call Min-san for help. Starting this year, this would be my job.

“So-so that means Fujishima-kun gets to spend the entire day with Alice on the bed?”

“Well, that’s right—wait, what do you mean on the bed? I can’t do anything if I get onto the bed, right?”

“You can comb her hair and keep it nice.”

“That’s your job, Ayaka.”

“Or you can hug her and take a nap with her.”

“That’s what you want to do, Ayaka!”

Min-san gave a mischievous smirk as she interrupted,

“Alice today is very interesting; she’s as obedient as a cat with flu. If you hug her today, she’s not going to make a fuss. You can try, Narumi.”

No way. What’s interesting about that?

It seemed that if I continued to stay in the kitchen, we would be getting further away from the topic, so I hurriedly climbed the emergency staircase towards the detective agency office on the 3rd floor. Alice was dressed in mourning clothes, knelt in front of the bed as she prayed. Why’s she wearing mourning clothes? Because it’s a rest day and she wanted to create a Church-like atmosphere? Also, the newly installed 5.1ch amplifier was playing Haydn’s Oratorio. My head ached as I heard it, and I hurriedly got onto the bed to lower the volume.

“What are you doing?” Alice lifted her black veil, raising an eyebrow as she asked.

“Nothing much. It’s noisy, that’s all.”

“Can’t you hear the lamentations of all the NEETs outside the wall?”

If I could, I wouldn’t be here. I’ll be looking for an ENT doctor.

“I was downstairs, and heard that Min-san had been taking care of you up till last year?”

“Master’s different from you. She pressed the air conditioner remote without me having to say a word.”

That’s because you’re so demure compared to usual that Min-san found it amusing.

“Or are you going to ask Min-san for help? I’ll just call her in then.”

Like usual, I returned with a sigh, and right when I was about to leave the bed, I found the sleeve of my shirt being tugged at. Shocked, I turned around to look, and saw Alice give me an earnest look.

“Are you really serious about going back?”

“Eh? You wish for me to go back, so I will. I’ll get Min-san up.”

“Did anyone ask you to do so!?”

“Nope, so you prefer me?” Was she really scared of being played like a fiddle?

“I didn’t say you’re better!”

I placed my hand on my forehead. What in the world.

“So you want me to go back without calling Min-san up?”

“How did you end up deriving such a conclusion!?” Alice slammed the mattress hard as she yelled. At this point, I started to feel that nothing mattered.

“Erm, then, what do you want me to do?”

Alice puffed her cheeks, pulled the hem of her mourning skirt, and pointed at the computers behind her.”

“Start shopping on the internet.”

I had been Alice’s assistant for almost a year, but I was not sure how Alice would spend her days if there were no cases present. Until this Labor Thanksgiving day, that was.

Alice shoved the keyboard to me, and ordered me to search information on all kinds of dolls on the internet, and post on the forums. She really reviewed the designs of the dolls, the feeling when she hugged it, and the sewing.

Following that, it was to collect all kinds of information regarding Dr. Pepper. I had to search through everything about Dr. Pepper, and even spend wildly on it. Thus, Alice did not like the band Guns and Roses, but she had 5 copies of the 'Chinese Democracy' album. If she found any message criticising Dr. Pepper for not being nice or too medicinal, she would refute him in a logical manner (on first glance). Of course, Alice only narrated this today, and I was in charge of typing at the keyboard.

"…You do this every day?"

I asked in a worn out voice, and my fingers on the keyboard were already trembling.

"Of course! I have to protect the reputation of Dr. Pepper no matter what!"

Isn't the beverage company protecting that already? I really wanted to retort back, only to swallow my words back in. Even if I did say the appropriate things, it did not mean that people would be happy. This was a fact I learned, having worked as a detective's assistant for a year.

But even so, why did I have to type instead of Alice?

"God decreed that nobody is to work the Sabbath, so we can't operate any machinery. It's said that the Jews can't press the elevator buttons."

"…Isn't commanding me verbally about the same thing?"

"Actually, the work here refers to the 'Assembly of the Tabernacle' mentioned in Exodus Chapter 35. The only taboo the Bible originally stated was that we cannot create fire, and not much explanation to anything else. Thus, the scholars are confused about this explanation. However, the chapters listed after the Sabbath records lots of work about setting up the Tabernacle, so the scholars felt that it's a 'job' forbidden by God. Of course, after 3,500 years, the definition of work expanded, sometimes stricter, sometimes looser.

“Ah…” And so?

“Work doesn’t include talking. I’m just talking now.”

“You really can wiggle your way out of this!”

And with Alice bombarding me, I left my mark on various websites. At this moment, I decided to seize the opportunity to ask something I had always been curious about, but was unable to do so for some reason.

“Alice, are you a Christian?”

“Impossible.” Alice shrugged. “I’m an Atheist. This so-called religion is something created to answer the doubts of little children, like why we can’t kill, why we can’t steal, why do we go to Church on Sunday. Belief can give a clear answer to these questions. In other words, we’ll be lectured by a certain Someone stronger than we are. But when our adolescence, we need to bid farewell to religion.”

“I see.”

It was an ironic viewpoint, I felt, but really how Alice would look at things.

“So why are you going about with that Sabbath?”

“Because I’m a weak kid too. I need to make use of it from time to time.”

“Make use?”

“Right. The definition of religion is ultimately to get us to relax, to entrust our thoughts and frustrations to an Absolute Entity. Even you probably had someone you prayed too.”

“Hmm…I did, actually.”

“So I say, my definition of religion is the same as most Japanese. I don’t think religion is something special. God should be an absolute existence, but both of us aren’t so free that we can be caring for each other all day long.”

“So today’s the day we pay attention?”

“Right, just as how you will only care about God on Christmas and Hatsumode[2], I spend November 23 living in purity.”

I felt that I was forced to listen to an answer completely unrelated to me, but I mostly agreed. However, there was something I was curious about.

“Speaking of which, Alice, you don’t seem to care if what form God appears in, do you?”

“I don’t. Even if it’s a sardine head.”

“But you really use a lot of Bible scriptures.”

Hearing that question, Alice immediately quit down, and averted her eyes. It was a rare reaction.

“Back when I was at my old home, I was forced to recite them.”

Old home. Alice’s old home…

I had no idea about how Alice end up coming to this room on the 3rd floor of a building filled with shops, and she only indicated that she wanted to leave her family. In the end, I was unable to clarify about it, not simply because Alice showed a smile as gloomy as a cloudy day in November, and also because Ayaka suddenly opened the door.

“Alice, Fujishima-kun, here’s some ice cream!”

Bursting into the office with life was Ayaka, holding the tray of ice cream with one hand, her round eyes widened as she stood at the bedroom room.

“Fujishima-kun, you said all that, but you spent the entire day on the bed, you know?”

“Eh? Ah, ahh, no, Alice asked me to do a lot of things.”

“W-well, how do I put it.” Alice pushed her aside, and ducked under the bed to hide from Ayaka. “I didn’t let him smell me, didn’t let him sleep with me, didn’t let him touch my underwear, socks and pajamas. You don’t have any reason to lecture me.”

Those words really hurt my pride as a human. Can you please don’t refute to that specific level…

“Really? Not even a cuddle?”

“O-of course not!” Alice kicked my leg away, avoiding me. Even

beyond the black veil, I could tell that she was blushing furiously."

"Then I'll cuddle you instead!"

With tray in hand, Ayaka got onto the bed, left it on the side table, and rushed towards Alice. Before the latter could resist, she was turned around, and seated on Ayaka's thighs.

"Why do you have to hug me every single time?"

"Because this is the only position I can feed you ice cream."

"I can eat it by myself." Alice was furious.

“And when I’m hugging you, Fujishima-kun won’t come over to hug you.”

“What’s with that weird reason!? And why do you look like you accept that explanation, Alice!?”

I slammed the bedsheet a few times, but the two girls had already diverted their attention towards the ice cream.

“This ice cream is made from rice.”

“Hm. It’s really rice. I never thought that I would one day be move by the taste of rice.”

Alice muttered, *I can only be amazed by Master’s techniques*

“You see, today’s that new tasting day or Rice Tasting day or whatever, right? That’s why Min-san made this rice flavoured ice cream.”

“So it’s thanks to that that we get this nice Eye?”

“Eve?” Ayaka looked confused, and Alice turned around to meet Ayaka in the eyes, repeating everything she had told me.

“I see. That means you can’t be a detective today, Alice?”

“That’s right.” Alice shrugged. “For a Sabbath, any work that result in reward is a taboo.”

“So what happens if a customer visit?”

“He’ll have to return for the day.”

“Ehh? But isn’t that a pity? Isn’t there Fujishima-kun? He’s an assistant.”

“I rather have them do a phone call consultation than leave Narumi to the customers.”

For Alice, this level of spite was courteous of her. For Alice, that is,

“First, a detective’s assistant is only an assistant, and not a replacement detective, just like how the moon can’t replace the sun. I told Naurmi 500 times or so that he’s not suited to be one.”

“Then, then, someone just needs to be the replacement detective, right?”

“…Hm?”

“I want to be a detective for a day!”

And so, on this day, Ayaka was in charge of being the substitute

NEET detective, and my first order of business was to stick a ‘fake’ label at the front of the ‘NEET detective agency’.

“If the customers come by thinking that I’m a real detective, it’ll be fraud!” Ayaka said, “I’ll be a detective, you’ll be a doll, Alice. Try your best not to talk or mouth.”

“Mmmm.”

Alice, dressed in mourning clothes, sat obediently on Ayaka’s lap, really resembling a doll. As for why Alice would agree to this proposal obediently, it was because Ayaka threatened Alice, that if she didn’t get to be a detective for a day, she’s going to make Alice take a bath.

“Well, whatever. I decided to have a rest day today. Customers won’t come by that easily.”

“Then, Fujishima-kun, how about making a few promotional calls?”

“Promotional!?”

Both Alice and I exclaimed in madness.

And thus, I exited the office, down the emergency staircase to the first level. The first one I called was Tetsu-senpai. He dropped out from the high school I was studying at, and a Pachinko pro now, an undisputed NEET.

“Ahhn!? A request? ” senpai’s disgruntled voice could be heard from the cellphone.

“Yeah. If you got any troubles right now, fake detective Ayaka can solve it for you, it seems.”

“Hey! What day do you think it is today? It’s Labor Thanksgiving day, you know? The day us NEETs stay at home and shiver. Tell Ayaka that I’ll play with her tomorrow.”

I could only hang up the phone and give up on Tetsu-senpai. Up next was a call to Hiro, a gigolo who specializes in conning girls for a living.

“Eh? Now? I’m in a hotel. Yes, I won’t be going out. Ahh, that girl’s bathing now. No, I met for the first time today. She asked me out. Right, it’s Labor Appreciation day, so I won’t take the

initiative to ask girls out, I'll just accept."

I sighed, and hung up the phone. Next was a phone call to Major. He's a college student, but always skipped classes, so he's partially a NEET.

"I won't take a single step out of the house. Of course? If I'm to accidentally do some labor, I'll be thanked. Then I'll lose my right to be a NEET, right?"

I had enough, and hung up. Finally, after much deliberation, I called Yondaime. He's yakuza.

"Idiot, a holiday's a holiday." Guess it's a holiday.

He hung up on me. I exhausted all my options. Whatever, not having any customer now is a sign of peace. I laid down on the large wooden stool placed at the empty space outside the back door of the ramen shop, staring at the greyish skies. The atmosphere of Winter appeared as though it's going to fall from the clouds. As Alice said, I should be spending my time peacefully on such a holiday.

But after the sun set, there was a customer who came by. It's Meo.

"Excuse me!....Huh?"

I heard a girl's voice from the entrance of the ramen shop. I put the broom and the dustpan at the door, and went to the road. The thick bouncing braids and the coffee-colored skin were coupled with a beaming smile that got bigger once she saw me.

"…Meo?"

"Assistant-san!"

Meo turned towards me happily, and hugged my arm. She's wearing a thick jumper on top, but like usual, she's wearing denim hot pants. It's already November. I started to worry if she'll be cold.

"Why is 'Hanamaru' closed? Did something happen?"

"Ahh, it's closed for today. Min-san went out to drink."

"Mmm, too bad. I wanted to have some ramen and ice cream." Meo

curled her lips, staring at the pulled shutters of the shop. Suddenly, she tugged my arm towards her, “Good thing you’re already, assistant-san!”

Meo’s two years younger than me, born in Thailand. Her mom remarried a Japanese, so she came to Japan in her youth. Her Japanese’s a little weird at times, but there’s no real communication problem. Because of a certain incident, she came to request us, and after it was solved, she occasionally dropped by at ‘Hanamaru’.

“What about papa?”

Meo’s papa wasn’t really a member of the yakuza, but he got some involvement. His main job was to take care of the foreigners working in the brothels. To be honest, I’m not willing to meet him.

“Papa has to go around to all the shops he often goes to today and have some thanksgiving feast. Because of that Labour Thanksgiving or something? Right now, he’s going around to the shops Meo can’t enter.”

I see. So the world of yakuzas too have a Labor Thanksgiving day.

“I want to meet detective-san! Let’s go! Let’s go!”

Meo dragged me by the arm towards the emergency staircase. I didn’t even have the time to say that Alice wasn’t available.

“Chairman-san’s here too? Wah! Why’s detective-san dressed in a blac, pretty dress? Meo wants to hug too!”

Once we entered the detective agency, Meo got really excited. Alice, in her mourning clothes on the bed, was on tenterhooks like a cat, and Ayaka inadvertently hide Alice behind her.

“Meo-chan, you need to wash your hands before hugging Alice!” Ayaka said, “Okay!” And Meo went straight for the basin.

“Don’t say it like she can hug me just because she washed her hands!” Alice was furious, but Meo was already running back and got onto the bed.

“Chairman-san, did you comb detective-san’s hair?”

“I did. It’s my job after all.”

Their first encounter was during the basement match back then,

and ever since then, Meo often came by to play, so they're on very good terms. The reason why Meo would call Ayaka 'chairman-san' was because Ayaka proudly introduced herself as "I'm the chairman of the school gardening committee!" In Meo's imagination, it seemed all the plants in school would greet Ayaka whenever the latter stepped into school.

"But chairman-san, why do you have detective-san's pajamas on you today?"

Very good question, Ayaka immediately leaned forward. The blue bear pajamas on her shoulders fell off.

"I'm going to be a detective for an entire day. Though I'm just pretending."

Meo's eyes dazzled.

"Then, chairman-san, please do something like detective-san!"

Ayaka opened her legs wide and stood on the bed, tugging Alice under her armpit like a doll, and lifted her chest proudly saying,

"I'm the NEET detective, the shitter of the dead."

"Speaker." The dead can't poop anyway [3]

"And you're remarking on this, assistant-san! This is great!"

She's actually delighted…Alice too was unable to speak due to shock and despair as she remained limp under Ayaka's armpit. I guess there's no point for me to be here anymore. As the kanji infers, 3 ladies coming together causes a lot of noise[4]. I felt that it was time for me to go home, and so I stood up, only for Alice to lift her head and lament.

"Narumi, why are you trying to go home!?"

"No…well, right now, I don't feel okay staying around."

"I'm the same here. You're planning to push all the suffering to me and run away? Who's going to stop these two from going crazy if you go back?"

I shrugged, and sat down on the icy floor in front of the friend."

“So, Meo-chan, what’s your request?”

“Anything goes?”

“Leave it to this fake NEET detective!”

“Then, I wanna get married to papa!”

“You’ll need to ask stork-san.”

Why ask the stork? Isn’t that too much of a leap!?

“Then, I want to get married to assistant-san.”

“There’s only one Fujishima-kun around, so no.”

“Ehh!”

Don’t you feel there’s something strange with the whole conversation!?

Meo and Ayaka returned home, and I stayed behind to handle the duties of the assistant. Thus, the sky was completely black when I left the office, and even the breath exhaled was solidly white. I checked the time on my watch, and found that it was already 1am. I heard an entire day of ‘Oratario’ and ‘The Four Seasons’[5], so I was feeling groggy, so much that I couldn’t describe it other than suffering.

I walked down the emergency staircase, and casually looked over to the train station beyond the low buildings. On the other end were bustling streets, and the shop lights continued to dazzle, the passers-by moving about. The lights shone upon an actress on a building billboard, holding a chocolate product and smiling at everyone. The red and green lights hanging on the trees by the road flickered, and Jingle Bells could ostensibly be heard.

November was coldly forgotten by the city.

It was to be expected. Once Halloween was over, the merchants waved their flags, directly everyone’s attention towards Christmas. Well, Winter was beginning.

I brought my bicycle between the buildings, and tugged at my duffle coat.

I pedalled my way out of the alley. Once I got out, I found a group of people huddled around, seated on the road, chatting furiously. The wine cups and cans of beers dazzled in their hands, and at the center of it was an oil can lit with leaves and newspapers.

“…So I say, that old man’s inside intel can’t be trusted.”

“Shut up, yuou idiot. I was winning until the fourth race.”

“But didn’t you believe in that weird level 6 information and run around since morning, Tetsu?”

I found that one of the 4 men was Tetsu. Leaving aside his physique, there weren’t many who would wearing just a short-sleeved shirt in this weather of howling winds. The other three old men were dressed in a worn out jumper, a thin dean’s jacket or an oil-stained trench coat.

“Oh? Narumi, you’re still around?”

Tetsu-senpai was the first to find me, and raised the wine cup towards me. The others too turned to look at me. They’re all tanned rather dark, and their untrimmed moustaches had some white in them. I suppose I saw their faces before.

“What are you doing here? The fire department might be called here because of you setting a fire in the middle of the night.”

“Don’t be so stuck up. Labor Thanksgiving Day is over, and we’re having a party here. We were betting at the race tracks. Pe-san took a huge loss, and Mori-san got a huge win, so it’s like we’re celebrating and consoling here.”

“Heh, why do I have to toast with gutter water in such a cold weather?”

The Pe-san Tetsu-senpai mentioned was dressed in a Hiroshima Carp[6] cap, grumbling softly. On a closer look, I found that the PET bottle that was supposed to contain tea was completely clear.

“If only ‘Hanamaru’s open, we’ll be able to have some ramen.”

Mori-san was a strange looking man with a few band-aids plastered on his bald head. He had a beer can in one hand, and grilled chicken in the other.

These guys are the homeless ones close to Tetsu-senpai and the rest of the NEET detective agency. I remember they stayed at a nearby park, but I had not seen them recently.

I was not too familiar with them, and nodded, ready to cycle off. However, “Come here for a while, Narumi.” Tetsu-senpai suddenly grabbed me by the collar.

Left with no choice, I could only park my bicycle by the road, and crouch down beside Tetsu-senpai, looking around at the trio. Pe-san didn’t looked happy, while Mori-san’s completely drunk red. What did he want me to do, asking me to join in on their drinking party when I couldn’t drink?

And they’re all homeless, the kind of people I didn’t want to get close to. Tetsu-senpai, Major and Hiro’s always able to chat with them so easily though. What were they talking about?

There was an awkward atmosphere as nobody spoke up, so I broke the silence.

“…E-erm, it’s been a while. I thought you moved somewhere else.”

“We did.”

The 3rd person spoke quietly. He had glasses, messy hair, and a whisky flask in hand. If he had a white coat on, he would resemble a reviled college professor. I remember this man as Ginji-san, one of the leaders of the tent city.

“Some weird people came to the park and forced us out. Construction should be starting.”

“Construction?”

“Don’t you know, Narumi? You see, that place’s about to be renovated into a ‘Hercules Park’. Looks like the entire park’s going to be rebuilt into futsal courts.

“Ah…”

I remembered. So it’s that park?

That incident warranted a fiery discussion in the media. The multi-national sportswear company ‘Hercules’ bought the park from the town council, hoping to rebuild the place altogether—or so it was

reported, “But what about the homeless living there?” and the residential committees began to protest.

“So, what’s the outcome of that?”

“None.” Ginji-san curled his lips, and took a swig of whiskey. “Can’t do anything about it. All we could only do was wait and get chased away, that’s all.”

“Didn’t you all go protest or something, Ginji-san? Something about human rights.” Senpai asked.

“How can we possibly do such a thing?”

Ginji-san stared back at Tetsu-senpai, and took another swig.

“What’s the point of protesting? It’s just adding on to our troubles. All we can do is wait and have others kick up a fuss for our sake to delay the construction instead. We don’t have to do anything.”

I felt that he seemed to be talking about someone else’s matter entirely. No, maybe I should have said that he’s being rational. He’s right anyway,

“And there’s some conmen amongst the volunteers.”

I looked at GInji-san’s face.

“Conmen?”

What could the conmen gain by scamming the homeless? They don’t have money anyway.”

“We don’t have an address, and are unable to obtain living protection fees.”

Mori-san smiled at us saying that,

“Some people pretended to be kind to us, saying that they’ll provide a place for us to stay, but actually, they’re planning to trap us and take the welfare money that was supposed to given for our sakes. A few of our buddies got duped, and it’s thanks to Ginji-san keeping an eye on those conmen that they’re finally gone.”

“Su-such things actually do exist?”

In this world, there are such people who would come up with such

devious ideas.

“There are also those who wanted us to take up queuing work, but instead, we end up paying for stuff.”

“Ginji-san’s very familiar with such matters, so he negotiated these for our sakes.”

“It’s because you’re too ignorant that you’re duped by them.”

This queuing work refers to the people who are called in to queue up on the day some popular game or product’s being released However, there are some scam companies who wouldn’t pay the homeless money to buy. Just hearing everyone mention this caused my heart to feel heavy, and even the saliva stuck deep within my throat was in lumps.

In any case—they’re homeless, so the weight they bear is obviously much more than the happy-go-lucky bunch of NEETs. I felt that there were a lot of things I couldn’t ask, and just approaching them was causing me to feel depressed.

“It’s late. I’ll make a move first.”

And just when I said this, a strong light shone in from behind me.

“You guys already gathered!? I want a toast too!”

The light vanished, and there was a diminutive person entering the softer street light. He has a baby face of an elementary school kid, wearing goggles and a helmet with camouflage colors. It’s Major.

“Captain GInji! Pe-san! Mori-san! Vice Admiral Fujishima too! This painful day of November 23rd is finally over, so let’s get down to the Ministry of Health, Labor and Wealt and bombard it with 21 cannons!” Somebody, hurry up and arrest this guy.

“You’re carrying a lot of stuff, Major.”

Tetsu-senpai noted as he stared at the large backpack Major was carrying. That backpack seemed large enough to stuff another 3 of him.

“Our team’s going to Mt. Fuji this winter for a month to engage in a large scale gun battle, so I’m starting my training now.”

He’s talking about survival games. Just to note.

“Is it really okay for a college kid to not show up for classes?”

“That is that. This is this.”

“Hitoshi, didn’t you say that you’re planning to become a technician? Did you take the exam this year?”

Ginji-san’s sudden words caused me to turn around in shock.

“That’s too troublesome, so I gave up on that. The professor has been telling me to study, but setting up a business is better than doing research.” Major came to my side and reached out for the fire.

“Well, that’s right. You’re still in your 3rd year, aren’t you, Hitoshi? That professor will just use you as a free maintenance worker, and you’ll just be his servant when you enter the lab. That professor won’t help you, and will steal the authorship of your thesis.”

“I’m not so terrible that I need you to lecture me, Ginji-san. I won’t be going to work though.”

I looked back and forth between the duo. Hitoshi’s the Major’s given name, right? I didn’t know they were on such good terms, and though I couldn’t understand their conversation, Ginji-san might have done some research related matters before, right?

“Major, didn’t you say that you want to make a missile or something?” Pe-san then interrupted.

“I want to invent a fighter jet nobody can see or touch.” Then nobody’s going to sit on it.

“Then help us uild a machine that’ll kill those damn brats for us when we sleep.”

Mori-san, seated on the other side of the fire, leaned forward, looking serious as he told Major this.

“…Did something happen?” Major asked.

“Didn’t you hear? It’s about the attacks on the homeless. Didn’t the news report about them?”

“Ah…”

Major glanced aside at Tetsu-senpai and me. Speaking of which, I

supposed I saw it on the internet. I hardly watch the TV, so I'm not so familiar with the current news.

Inquiring further, we learned that the homeless around the station had been bullied by some scoundrels. Splashing cold water or throwing rocks into cardboard houses would be child's play of a prank; others threw firecrackers, sparklers, or even scatter nails and thumbtacks. It's said that some were already seriously hurt.

"Didn't you call the police? You can't just let it go on like this."

"The police did do something, but we're homeless, and the police can't be patrolling for our sake for entire nights. The pranks have been escalating recently. I went to the area below the railway as it's getting harder to stay in the park, and then 7-8 of them attacked me together. I heard some really loud sound, and then my head seemed to be burning."

Mori-san said, and Major lifted his goggles, moved around the fire, and went to Mori-san. He reached his hand, and grabbed Mori-san's bald head.

"O-o-ouch! What are you doing, Major!?"

Major peeled off a bandair on Mori-san's head, and touched the wound with his hand. He licked his fire, and we're unable to say anything.

"…This is probably the 031g semibio super fine bullet sold by the 'Hiraya Model shop'."

"What are you saying?"

Tetsu-senpai stared at Major's face worriedly.

"I'm talking about the bullets that hit Mori-san. Production of these bullets stopped two years ago. This is unbelievable."

What's unbelievable is your observation skills. No, that's not the important part.

"…Bullet?"

"Probably fired from an air gun, looks like it's a wound from a modified gun."

"Hey, stop touching my head already."

Mori-san shook off Major's hand.

"Those homeless guys should be armed, right? What about your numbers and equipment?"

"How do I know? I suddenly something stinging on my head in the darkness, and when I got up, I found the others rolling about, yelling that it's painless and such. Didn't see anyone other than us."

"Long ranged sniping, huh? If it's the 0.31g, it's possible. Looks like they got some nightvision scope ready too. I need to have a look though."

"Hey, Hitoshi, this has nothing to do with you, right?" Ginji-san said, and Major turned around, sliding his goggles down again. Under the lenses were a contorted, icy glare.

"It has something to do with me. This concerns the pride of a soldier."

"What's that about?" Tetsu-senpai muttered, and Major continued,

"Attacking non-combatants is the worst sin a soldier can commit. As someone who also wield guns, I never, ever forgive them for this."

However, I'm not a soldier (and there's doubt as to Major can be considered one), and I don't really have deep ties with the homeless.

For me then, the real start of the incident was a phone call that occurred a few days later—after school, on the first Wednesday in December. I was in 'Ramen Hanamaru' when that happened, and I parked my bicycle at the back of the shop, taking out my cellphone with my hand that was holding the handlebars before this.

Calling me was a rare customer. I took a deep breath, looked up at the clear winter sky, and opened my cellphone.

"Boy? It has been a while. How are you doing? I sent you a ticket for our October performance, and you didn't show up. We're lonely, you know."

"Ah, so-sorry about that. I've been busy."

In the prior Summer, I was asked by Yondaime to coordinate a

concert event, and the one calling this time was the vocalist of that band. She's an interesting lady, but when she continued to yap on, the listeners will be easily brainwashed by her, so I really had to exert a lot of effort just to talk to her. Again, I took a deep breath, and switched the phone to my left hand.

On the other hand of the phone, she lowered her voice, saying,

"It's another investigation request from me this time. For my friend."

I parked my bicycle with my other hand, and returned to the back door of 'Hanamaru', sitting at the pile of old, worn out tires.

"Eh? For someone in the industry?"

"Yes. She heard rumors about you, and want to ask you about something."

I drew a few circles on the dirt with my foot. Because of rumors about me.

Once, I was introduced by this person to solve another artiste's problem. It involved a threatening letter and some illicit photographs taken, and it was an incorrigible event. In the end, I had to solve with a last resort, but I'll leave the details to another day. The most important matter at this point would be that the detective agency's famous in the entertainment circles for some weird reasons.

"Hey, someone once said that the industry's filled with cold, bright lights and sounds. In this world, all pleas for help will be drowned out painfully, and nobody can hear us."

With bated breath, I heard the voice over the phone. Her voice's really unique, and not limited to her singing alone; even when talking, I could feel her voice as being akin to snowflakes seeping into skin before they melt.

"That's why we need someone like you guys, who are willing to listen to us."

The client she introduced to us dropped by at 'Ramen Hanamaru' at midnight. The shop was about to close, and both Min-san and I

were cleaning the kitchen. There's a polite knocking on the shutters that were halfway down, and when I lifted my head, I could find a slender figure.

"…Erm, is this Hanamaru?"

I could hear a female voice from beyond the glass.

"We're closed—" "Ah, that's likely to be my customer."

I cut off Min-san's voice, and went off to open the door. I ducked under the shutters, and found a face right in front of me. Stars scattered as we knocked into each other.

"…Ouch." "Oww."

I fell on my butt, and rubbed my forehead. Seeing that she too fell onto the floor, I realized that we knocked into each other because we wanted to duck under the shutters. The young girl put on the sunglasses that slid off, "S-sorry, are you oka—" Saying that, she wanted to stand up, only to stop on her own muffler and trip over again.

"A-are you okay yourself?"

I pulled the girl up, and she blushed as she picked up her sunglasses, lowering her wool cap to hide her face.

"I'm really sorry. Really sorry. I really am."

The girl lowered her head about 7 times or so, and after that, she kept rubbing her hands together, not looking at me at all. Her fluffy hair's dyed a bright brown, and I couldn't tell the age due to her lowering her head and wearing sunglasses and the wool cap, but I guessed that she's probably the same age as me, or a year older.

"I heard on the phone. Erm, you're Natsuki Yui-san, right?"

"Y-yes."

At this moment, she finally lifted her head. She was wearing a pair of light brown sunglasses, but when our eyes met, I felt a sugary pillar hitting at my chest. She's an idol. I could tell on first glance. She's not just an ordinary beauty, she exudes a glamor that could only be refined under the stares of thousands of people, at least.

Also, I had an impression on her face, but where exactly? Normally,

I hardly watch TV, and I only learned of her name on this day.

It's probably because I was brazenly staring at Yui-san's face that she lifted her jacket collar and hid her blushing face and retreated. At this moment, Min-san's voice could be heard from behind me.

"Hey, Narumi, what are you doing? Oh, a customer?"

Min-san pushed the shutters up, "Huh?" and muttered upon seeing Yui-san. "You…have been on the posters at the station recently."

"N-no, no no no, that's not me."

Yui-san jolted in shock, her hands raised to her face as she flailed them about. Even her face was increasingly red.

"No, well, that's actually me, but please don't say that to me directly."

And so, I recalled. Recently, there has been posters on the station's pillars and walls with her photos on them. They're probably from a certain sportswear manufacturer. No wonder I knew despite not watching any TV or reading magazines.

"I'm not too used to being recognized on the spot. Erm, can you please pretend not to know me?"

Yui-san's voice was so soft. Min-san and I exchanged looks. She's an idol, right? Was such a bashful person really suited to be an artiste?

"E-erm, may I enter the shop? If others are to find me now, I might cause you much trouble."

"Ah, yes. Please do so."

Min-san stared at me surprise. I clapped my hands together in apology, and brought Yui-san to the back of the shop. Climbing up the emergency staircase in the darkness, I heard interrupted footsteps behind me. The silence made the atmosphere unbearable. Before bringing her to Alice, I was hoping to explain to her the agency's background and ask what her request was about, and thinking that, I turned around at the stairwell.

"Erm." "E-erm."

It was at that moment that Yui-san lifted her head as she wanted to

ask me something. As we spoke in unison, I could tell, even in the darkness, that her face was turning red, flailing her hands wildly. Thus, she lost her balance, and stumbled backwards, nearly falling over. I hurriedly grabbed her hand, and pulled her back.

“So-so-sorry.”

Yui-san grabbed my arm firmly. I had been wondering if this person was fine all this while. Once I pulled her up to the stairwell, she hurriedly let go of me, and retreated to the handrail.

“Erm, I guess you think, tha-that I’m a strange one, right?”

“Yes, definitely.” Oops, I actually let loose what I was really thinking. Yui-san covered her face with both hands, and collapsed on the spot.

“I-I-I‘ve always been prone to getting nervous. An-anyway, well, I heard that the Fujishima-san I’m going to ask later is some really amazing freeter.”

“I’m not a freeter. How exaggerated have the rumors spread?”

“Eh? Eh?”

“Ah, no, well, sorry for the late introductions. I’m Narumi Fujishima.”

The weak lights from afar shone upon the emergency staircase, and a cold silence immediately enveloped us.

And immediately, Yui, squatting on the floor, finally lifted her head, asking me with a look of one seeking the Pole Star.

“You? Erm, Fujishima-kun, I heard that you’re able to summon about 500 men on a single command, right?”

“That’s just a completely baseless rumor!”

“B-but, I heard a lot of things about you, like how the hoodlums who came to mess up a concert ran away terrified once they heard your name, that you crushed a Chinese mafia bank, and managed to figure out a drug trade before the police could—”

“Please use some common sense. I’m just a high school boy!” I slapped my own blazer. I heard a little of the details, but I was sure what she was referring to, and it really troubled me. Now there’s an

additional tail to the story, and also a whole lot of feathers, propellers and machine guns added to it.

“I-is that so?”

Yui-san grabbed her ears with her hands, and took an exaggerated deep breath, allowing herself to calm down.

“Sorry, I’m completely confused. I’m always…prone to panicking so quickly.”

“All the time? And to think you’re able to work on TV.”

I really tried to endure the urge, but I let out an annoyed tone. Yui-san shrank back once she heard that.

“During live shows, my head will always blank out. I have to perform in front of a large group of strangers during concerts, and sometimes, I would faint.”

There has to be a limit as to how terrified you can be, right? Why’s such a person working as an idol that requires more people to look at her? Was it that the job request was to change the bad habit of her being easily tense?

“So, the freeter we’re going to find isn’t you, but someone else, Fujishima-san?”

“As I said, it’s not a freeter. A detective.”

“Detect…ive?”

Right when I was about to ask how the NEET detective agency was introduced to Yui-san, I could hear a frenetic sound of the door being opened above me, and so Yui-san and I were quiet. Soft footsteps stopped at the stairs before they could descend. Appearing in front of us were blue pajamas and glossy black white reflecting the weak street lights. It’s Alice; her eyes were widened as she stared at Yui-san and me, her face showing the gradation of a sunset.

“—Wh-what are you dithering for? You should hurry up and bring the customer up to the office.”

“Ah right, doing so now. You don’t have to welcome us.”

Hasn’t she been coming out more often recently? So I thought.

“Who’s welcoming you now?”

“Am I wrong? Then why did you come up?”

“It’s because you didn’t bring the customer up that I came out to call you.”

Wouldn’t that be welcoming us?

“U, uu, anyway, hurry up.”

Alice swung her hair, turned back to return to the office, and slammed the door hard. I sighed, and turned around to look at Yui-san.

As I expected, Yui-san was rooted to the spot, slack-jawed.

Following this would be the one most important job for me as a detective’s assistant, even though it’s really, really stupid.

“Erm, I know it’s really impossible to believe, but she’s the detective.”

“I’m not just a detective. I’m the NEET detective.”

I could hear Alice’s voice from behind, and I turned around in shock. A tiny slit was opened at the office door, before it closed.

“…E-e-erm, that little girl?”

Yui-san finally spoke up, pointing at the door with the number 308 on it.

“She’s little, but she’s reliable in her work, so don’t worry.”

Explaining this, I thought,

If Alice’s willing to wear the Sherlock Holmes outfit as she did on Halloween, the customers will be more inclined to believe her.

I led Yui-san into the office, into the bedroom located deep inside the office, and she removed her sunglasses, widening her eyes. However, her gaze was not stuck on the air conditioning howling cold winds like Mount Rokko[7], not the monitors that filled up three different walls, but at the pile of dolls on the bed.

“…Woah, this is a Steiff Peter rabbit! I-is it authentic? Woah! This white bear! Is that a new product by Kosen? It’s supposedly not sold yet!”

“H-hm? You know?”

Alice was seated on the bed, and put down her keyboard as she stared at Yui-san’s face.

“My room’s about the same too! But you have a lot of dolls I want but can’t get! This is great! This black cat is a limited edition product by Jellycat, right?”

“I got it by using an automated bot on an auction. A prize I won after 7 days of continual battles.”

Alice proudly puffed her chest.

“How nice. Can I touch it?”

“Sure, of course. Get on.”

Yui-san got onto the bed cautiously, and raised the rabbit, kitty, bear and dolphin dolls, hugging them firmly in order.

“This doll here has a tag, and is old. It’s pretty expensive, right?” “Fabrics invented after the Sixties are really rough. I don’t like them.” “A serial number!? Ehh, how do I buy one?” “I got a Norwegian buyer…”

The two girls started to get excited over something I couldn’t understand. Can I just go home already?”

“I got a new color version from this bunny series.”

“Hmm? How did you get it? I didn’t know they released a new color.”

“A coordinator I know has a relative who designed this bunny. Do you want one?”

“Of course!” Alice was jumping about. “If you have any dolls you want, just tell me. As exchange.”

“Then, I want the same owl doll here!”

“I’ll contact you when the goods come in. If there is, it’ll reach me

directly."

"Great!"

Yui-san rolled about on the bed. Seriously, what's she here for?"

"Ohhh, I always wanted to live in such a room! Having a pile of dolls, rolling around on the bed, with bear-san, cat-san and rabbit-san…" "L-let go! I'm not a doll here!"

Ah, she ended up hugging Alice after all. I thought she wasn't that kind of person.

Finally, Alice noticed my stare, and calmed down, deliberately coughing.

"You didn't come all the way here for the dolls, but something else, right? Let's hurry into the issue."

"So-sorry."

Yui-san got off the bed with a teary face, and again stepped onto the her skirt, tripping over. "Woah!" I hastily went forth to support her, and she kept apologizing as she slid down my body, sitting on the floor.

"I-I really do trip often…"

Isn't it better for you not to go out? I nearly let slip those words. And to think she's able to make it to the entertainment industry. By the time I realized it, I found Alice glancing aside at me, giving me a cold glare.

"You're usually so dull, so what's with that reaction?" Alice puffed her cheeks.

"Wh-what are you being angry for?"

"I'm not angry. Get Dr Pepper for the guest and me."

No, she's angry, right? But I knew that if I said it, I would just make her angry. I moved away from Yui-san, and went to get the drinks from the kitchen. Yui-san saw the red can of 350ml liquid, "Ah, I don't need it." And smiled as she said it. It's to be expected.

"If not, I'll drink both. Tell me your request."

Alice drank the two cans of carbonated drinks, and Yui-san fidgeted about, putting her hands together, and opening them. I suppose she was sorting out her thoughts. Only when Alice finished the second can of drinks did she finally speak up.

"…There's a town park around here, right?"

I sat near the door of the room, leaning my back onto the fridge, and cautiously listened to the conversation.

"The park near the railway, that place is going to be built as a 'Hercules Park'. I came by a few times for photo shoots and activities."

"Um. You're the campaign girl for 'Hercules' this year, right?"

"Y-you know?"

"Of course I do. Even though I'm not a NEET detective who can survey all three thousand years, just a simple search on the name Yui Natsuki gets me thousands of sportwears poster images." "Ah, ahh, p-please don't look."

Alice was shocked to see Yui-san blushing and waving her hands.

"What are you saying? It's your job to be watched. Stop dancing, keep talking."

"O-okay. Right, and then, when I passed by my park that day, I saw dad…or at least, someone who looks like me dad."

I stared at the back of Yui-san's head that was covered by the wool cap, and I couldn't understand what she was saying. What happened to her dad?

But Alice seemed to realize what Yui-san was getting at, and coldly stared at her, asking,

"So you're saying that one of the homeless folk is your father?"

Yui-san nodded quietly. I gulped, and looked back and forth between the brown hair under the wool cap and Alice's black eyes.

Yui's father was one of the homeless…?

"…He left home when I was very young, and I didn't see him for a few years. It's only a while back that I so happened to spot him at

the park."

Yui-san grabbed the leg of the bed, and her words were filled with sobbing as she got agitated.

"I went to look for him several times, but the homeless in the park are gone, and I couldn't find him. So…."

Yui-san's unable to continue, and Alice stared at her for a while, before saying,

"Can you please tell me the reason why your father left home?"

Yui-san's eyes were wandering in the cold winds, seemingly seeking the lead cast by Alice.

"My dad once ran a spare parts company, and that company went bankrupt…I guess it's because of this, and all the creditors kept coming to our house, even stationed here long after he vanished."

"I see. You're from Aichi prefecture, right? So your father came to Tokyo to escape from the creditors, and there's a high chance that he'll become a homeless, but is that really your father?"

"I can't be mistaken. That's really dad."

"And so?"

"…I want to talk to him. Please look for him."

Alice stared at Yui-san's face, and turned her face to the keyboard by her hands.

"Do you have a photo of your father?"

"From more than 10 years back."

Yui-san took out a large, old photo from her handbag, and on that photo were a few men in uniforms, standing side by side. Yui-san pointed at the man in the middle, and I peered in from behind.

"Ah…"

I let slip a voice.

I did see that person before. I etched the face of a middle-aged man with healthy skin color and brimming with a rational mindset upon

the gruff, arduous image of a man who wandered and suffered for more than 10 years.

“…Ginji-san?”

Yui-san was shocked, and turned around to look at me. Alice too lifted her eyes slightly, and turned around to face the screen. The slender fingers danced upon the keyboard as she used the hi-specs application to find the specified person in the images. There were 6 surveillance cameras set up near the office, so the fortress of computers shielding Alice could search 2 months worth of images.

“...This man?”

Alice turned around, and pointed at a crude, enlarged figure on the monitor.

Ginji-san and his homeless friends at the park would occasionally drop by at ‘Hanamaru’ to eat, so there was such a distinct image left behind.

I compared the image on the monitor to the photo crumpled by Yui-san. Are they realy the same person? Looks similar, but might not be the same. But Yui-san nodded several times.

“…Dad….”

Yui-san’s murmured vanished in the strong breeze of the air-conditioning.

Alice set the keyboard again, hugged a large bear doll and turned to Yui-san.

“Before I accept this request, there is something I need you to decide on.”

The ball of wool on Yui-san’s cap sook uneasily.

“…What is it?”

“How much do you want us to help? The homeless call this man Ginji, and he’s one of our friends’ acquaintances. If you simply need me to find him today and tell you where he is, I can do so with a snap on the fingers.”

“Really?”

Yui-san leaned forth, her hands on the edge of the bed, and she sounded optimistic.

“But if you want to bring him to you, that’ll be a different case.”

Alice’s eyes were pointing right at Yui-san’s eyes, and the latter’s eyes lost luster due to her perplexed emotions.

“Your father left you on his own will, right? He might not be willing to meet you.”

“Uu…” Yui-san lowered her shoulders dejectedly.

“The price will be determined on the scope of the work. Decide then. What do you want?”

I could tell from the back that Yui-san was pondering with bated breath, and turned my eyes to Alice’s cold expression.

Alice today seem a bit like the day when Meo came running in with 200 million yen in her clutches, I thought.

Alice would only ease upon on the cramped jail or borders in her whenever she accepts a Alice. Despite this, she would cautiously swing the sword of words to avoid the blade from intruding upon a designated boundary. In contrast, even if some things would hurt certain areas within her, she would reveal the truth.

Alice wanted Yui-san to determine this boundary, but I guessed Yui-san probably couldn’t understand the intend behind Alice’s words.

She nodded, albeit in confusion,

“…I want to talk to dad. I have a lot to talk. Please bring him to me.”

Alice briefly looked at me, probably seeking my opinion as the detective’s assistant, I guess. Before nodding, I turned back to look at Yui-san.

The petite detective buried her chin into the head of the bear doll, and softly noted,

“Understood. I accept.”

The hour hand ticked towards a new day, and I sent Yui-san to the station.

The area near this place was the bustling area in town, but the East exit, where 'Hanamaru' was located, had no night attractions to mention, and only the lonely street lamps stood by the roads with few people. The weather was so cold, my ears were hurting, and I pulled up the collar of my duffle coat.

"E-erm, that girl."

Yui-san, walking beside me, glanced aside at me as she said,

"Is a girl like her really a detective? Her room's filled with dolls. Ah, but I too got excited about dolls like an idiot…also, why's she wearing pajamas."

"Hm, well."

It appeared she really wanted to ask Alice, but never did, and held it in. But even though she asked me, I didn't know how to answer.

"As you can see, she's a NEET, and a hacker. She can infiltrate all over the internet to gather information, but this time, she can't really use this ability."

"Is...that so? I'm really surprised. A little girl like her…"

I understand.

"I saw a lot of beauties since entering the entertainment industry, but this is the first time I saw someone with such blazing eyes."

"Huh?" I seemed to understand, and yet not.

"If the chairman is to see her, he'll definitely scout her."

You got to be kidding. No, Alice certainly appears interesting. I suddenly had an imagination of Alice appearing on Tamori's[8] afternoon show 'Iitomo'[9], and if Tamori asked her, "Did you cut your hair?", she would certainly snap back, saying, "I have never had my hair cut, not since I was born. You should at least consider my age and the growth speed of the human hair", and all I could do was shiver in fear and laugh sarcastically.

Yui-san's voice beside me interrupted my stupid thoughts.

“But why would such a little girl choose to be a detective?”

“Ah, erm...I'm not actually sure myself."

"Aren't you her assistant, Fujishima-san?"

"No, but, first,"

The saliva and disorientation swirled in my mouth in unison.

"Please stop calling me Fujishima-san. I'm younger than you, right?"

"But I heard that you're the go-to freeter here, Fujishima-san."

"I said I'm not a freeter! Are there really such rumors spreading in the entertainment circle? Did you mishear it?"

"Then...are you a boxer?" "I'm not a boxer!" Even though I did once!

"A victor?" "That's the company releasing your CDs, isn't it!?"

"Uuu, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. A minor character like me can't play dumb in front of you, Fujishima-san."

"I'm not an entertainer! Is that dumb act of yours just an act?"

Yui-san looked really terrified, probably because I went overboard with my retorts. Reflecting slightly upon it, I went silently, and turned to look at the dark street, where two long shadows shone upon.

"Actually, I'm just an ordinary high school boy. If you're nervous, I'll get nervous too. Just stay normal."

"But if you're just an ordinary high school boy, why did you become —her name's Alice, right? Why did you become her assistant?"

"Let's just say things turned out that way."

If I were to really explain, the story would be long enough for Arabian Nights.

"Is that so?" Yui-san glanced aside at me, "...Good thing we're of the same age. I thought it would be some terrifying place like a yakuza den, filled with scary muscular men."

How much has the detective agency been misconstrued as?

However, it's true that I do know of such people.

"And that detective's so cute. We even agreed to exchange dolls. I'm really looking forward to it! Oh yes, I forgot to ask for her contact!"

"Ahh, then, you can give me a call if you need something." I stopped, and was about to fish out my phone, only to stop. She's an idol. She can't be exchanging numbers with ordinary people, right?

"It's fine, it's fine."

Yui-san smiled, and started the infrared transmission.

"...Narumi? That's a unique name." Yui-san said as she stared at the data shown on her phone.

"Everyone calls me Narumi."

"I see..Narumi, kun? Can I call you that?"

Woah. I'm embarrassed to be called that now. I kept my cellphone in my pocket, and continued to move down the dark pedestrian pathway towards the station.

The pedestrian pathway's finally approached the railway, and the black trees in the park entered my eyes. Yui-san inadvertently hastened her steps, and walked in front of me. Her eyes remained upon the yellow, black fence in the forest, and in the shadows, one could see some abandoned sheds of cardboard and blue vinyl sheets. There were no residents to be seen from the sheds, and they probably would be torn down and redeveloped into futsal courts.

For me, that was a place I had some painful memories of. Back then, due to the issue over taking down the gardening club, I called out Tetsu-senpai and we had a fight on this futsal court to settle things. Thinking back about it, it was embarrassing, and I didn't want to approach this park. Thus, I never paid attention to the homeless living here.

"I came here a few times, but after that, I never saw him again."

Yui-san muttered.

"...So I'm a little worried, worried if he's really my dad…"

The silhouette stopped at the stairs branching off from the trees in the park, and the ball on the wool cap shook and stopped in a

forlorn manner.

"...Once you meet your father, what do you intend to do?"

I could not help but ask. The wool ball shook to the right.

"E-erm, I might, if you do meet Ginji-san and get a chance to talk to him, what do you intend to say to him then, Yui-san?"

"I earned a little bit of money."

Yui-san said, her back still turned on me.

"I guess I can help pay off dad's debts."

So please come back, was it really such a simple wish? I kept hoping for Yui-san to continue, but answering me in turn was silence. The night wind brought over the exhaust sounds of vehicles from opposite the railway, coupled with the music from the late night bars and drunkards making ruckus, sounding really forlorn when they passed through the filter of the fence.

"—I don't know."

Finally, Yui-san spoke with a feeble voice that could be blown away by the freezing winds.

"I don't know what I'll do once I meet my dad. When he left, I was still in elementary school; we were harassed by the creditors, and pushed around by our relatives. Until the very end of her life, mom was badmouthing dad."

Yui-san continued, her tone akin to dried dirt.

"So, I don't know what I'll do. I don't know what I should say."

Whether to hate him, or to reunite with him; that certainly applied to Yui-san's predicament.

For some strange reason, I could understand her feelings. if I were to return home and find my dad there, if someone's to ask me what I would say to him in such a situation, I probably would leave the living room without a word, and grovel in my blanket. After such a long absence, our hearts would have been so stubborn.

"...Ah."

Yui-san inadvertently muttered, and looked towards me. Even with the backlight on, I could see her blushing.

"What happened?"

"it's nothing! Let's hurry!"

She didn't look fine to me. Yui-san slammed my chest with both hands, but I looked over at where she was looking—the top of the fence separately the park and the railway, and I found my answer. Shown in my eyes was a huge billboard at the top of the building, and on it was a sidelong image of a determined looking woman bending down to tie her shoelaces and the logo of Hercules. There was no lighting, probably because it was not fully set up. Despite this, I could determine the female artiste on it.

"So-so I say, please don't look at me!'

Yui-san grabbed my shoulders with both hands, trying to change where my body was facing. Despite this, I compared the hidden, bashful face under the wool cap with the determined face floating in the night sky. Though not to the point of misidentifying them as two different people, I was impressed that there was such a huge contrast in demeanour.

"There's already a large-scale promotion activity near the station with lots of my photos. I'm feeling more embarrassed than ever."

Yui-san covered her face with the muffler, even her mouth. Really, could she actually handle the work in the entertainment industry?

Suddenly, I realized something.

"...When did the promotion begin?"

"Eh? Ah, ahh, yes, it started around last month when the billboard was up there."

If it started last month, it meant that Ginji-san could have seen it.

Did he find his daughter? They never met since her days in elementary school, so it's a little tougher now, right? It'll be great if he found out that it was his daughter. Even if he wanted to play dumb, he might let slip due to a moment of carelessness.

I instinctively realized that even if Ginji-san was Yui-san's father, he

probably wouldn't be too willing to meet Yui-san. Thus, I had to cautiously ask him, but how? Was it really okay to ask about the homeless' past?

While ponder and walking behind Yui-san, a sharp glare of light stung my eyes, and the shrill braking sound hit the guardrail.

"—Yui! What are you doing here!?"

A blue-purple car immediately parked right by us, and appearing was a tall, skinny man in his thirties or so. He shoved the door of the driver seat, and stormed out. A black shirt was matched with his leisure suit, and frosty eyes were behind the pale green glasses. He didn't appear to be an enemy, but he was fuming, and I inadvertently took a few steps back. Yui-san cringed back, wanting to cover her face with her muffler.

"B-b-b-b-b-but I'm on leave today!"

"I said that you have a rehearsal early in the morning tomorrow. There's a need to have a meeting!"

The man glared at me angrily.

"Who are you? Yui, did you...what are you thinking, having a boyfriend at such an important moment?"

"That's not it! Erm, Narumi-kun is erm, well, Pixar?" Pixar's an animation company, but this isn't the main point here. I exchanged looks between Yui-san and the glasses guy's faces, trying to grasp the situation as well as possible. He's probably someone related to the animation industry, I guess? Is he Yui-san's manager?

"Anyway, get onto the car! The chairman's worried too! Hurry back first. We'll talk on the car!"

The glasses guy grabbed Yui-san by the shoulder, and dragged her into the co-passenger seat. He then gave me a threatening glance, and went to the driver seat.

The blue-purple car drove off, leaving only the stench of car exhaust all over the place. I sat on the railing, and sighed.

I assumed it would be a very simple request, but at this point, I had an annoying premonition. The entertainment industry's a messy world, putting billions of corporate funds into unstable

personalities. This weight will unknowingly torment the idols, and then crush them at a crush point, an abrupt moment.

Thinking about how I didn't want to get too involved with him, I couldn't forget Yui-san's helpless expression when she failed to close the co-passenger seat.

I returned to the office, and Alice kept her scowl as she went to the corridor, saying,

"Why are you here? Didn't you go home?"

"Eh, eh? Why? My bicycle's still parked here at 'Hanamaru', and I still need to report something to you."

"And you were sending her off so happily…"

Alice immediately returned to the room. I just got the feeling that she was feeling under the weather, but why?

I too followed her into the bedroom, and reported about the glasses guy.

"He's probably Natsuki Yui's manager, called Washio Kazuto."

Alice simply answered as she tapped at the keyboard, her back facing me.

"It's this man, right?"

She pointed at the monitor at the top left. Shown on it was a crude image, probably a magazine photo. On the top left was an enlarged Yui, and there was a man in suit behind her, about to exit the glass door of a building. The sharp glare under his glasses really was unique, and I could identify him despite the crude image. I guess he's Yui-san's manager after all. Doesn't look decent. Did he remember my appearance?

"Did you inform the manager of the request?"

"Of course not." I answered, somewhat peeved. A detective's most important duty would be to maintain a client's secrecy.

"Good. Remember to remain so at all times."

"right. Understood."

"A noble NEET like me typically wouldn't accept this kind of cases, but we're looking for someone. I shall let you handle everything about this case. I don't have any affinity with the entertainment industry, after all."

Once she said that, I recalled what Yui-san said.

"Maybe you do have some affinity, Alice."

"What are you saying?'

I stated how Yui-san felt that the chairman would invite Alice into the entertainment industry, and the latter stopped what she was doing, turning around to face me. She looked as though she had just swallowed a live chick whole.

"...Wh-what nonsense are you saying?" Alice uttered those words, "Even if I do reincarnate 7,000 times, I can't possibly enter the entertainment industry."

"Well, I thought so, but you might be unexpectedly suited for it."

"Wh-what?"

She hugged the largest teddy bear, and buried her face into it.

"In other words, you'll go buy idol magazines with photos of me, fill my A1 posters to the ceiling, and preorder limited editions DVDs of me being filmed for 90 minutes?"

"I don't need to. The actual one's in front of me."

"Or are you going to bid for clothes I wore, queue overnight for a handshake meeting with me, and buy wax figurines of me?"

"I've never seen wax figurines of idols."

"Y-y-you just said such a long spiel of shameless folly!"

"You're the one talking about it!"

Alice hide behind the doll, huffing and puffing. She rubbed her palms onto her reddened cheeks, "Anyway, stop thinking about such stupid things."

"I just thought of it though. If you're to appear on TV, you might start some strange topic there...I wasn't being serious there, you know?"

"Of course. I'll be scared just thinking about thousands of anonymous people seeing me through the television. How am I able to speak out? A NEET detective's words don't exist for the sake of appearing on television."

Alice's words caused me to imagine her appearing on 'Tetsuko's Room' [10]. If Kuroyanagi Tetsuko is to ask, "What interesting things shall we discuss today?", Alice would surely reply, "A detective is the speaker of the dead, only able to hurt the living, and humiliate the dead. Are you willing to listen?" All I could do would be to break out in cold sweat and force a smile.

"Well, it's not a good thing for you to show up in public, so you can continue being my detective, Alice." I was saying that she would cause trouble for the likes of Tamori and Kuroyanagai Tetsuko and the other television network people, the hill of dolls suddenly collapsed. It was due to Alice rolling about on the bed.

"Y-your detective? Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-what are you saying?'

"What I'm saying...just what I think." If you're going to talk to others with the same tone you talk to me, you'll definitely anger them.

Alice looked up, a rare act in that, and tried to probe me, asking,

"...I-is that how you view me?"

"Well, sorry for saying the truth."

"Why are you apologizing!?"

"Why are you angry!?"

Alice stuffed her blushing face into the dolls, and ducked under the blanket.

"Even without you saying, I'll support you for the rest of your life with meager pay! I don't intend to increase the number of stupid assistants!"

"Alright, I get it." It would be great if there were bonuses. Anyway, what were we talking about?

"If you understand, go home. I'm not giving any overtime pay."

Alice lashed out as she peeked out from under the blanket. Sighing, I placed the scattered dolls back onto the bed, and walked out of the door. If I had to continue working and talking like this for the rest of my life, I guess it would be a wonderful life. At this point, all I could do was grimace and sigh.

Chapter 2

Thus, we soon found Ginji-san. Sunday afternoon, at around 4pm or so, right when I took a step out from the door and was about to ride on my bicycle, the cellphone in my pocket rang. It was from Major.

“Ginji-san, Mori-san, Conductor and Marienkhof-shi are together with me under the bridge. I only intend to chat with everyone. Oh, remember to buy some beer.”

But I’m underaged. Right when I was about to protest, the phone line got cut off. It appeared everyone forgot that I was still in high school, though there were times even I would forget.

Leaving aside the fact that I’m underaged, Conductor and Marienkhof-shi should be the names of some other homeless folks. That’s what they would casually call each other. Right, if Ginji-san’s really Yui-san’s dad, he probably has a real name.

I would be meeting him later, and I had to be cautious when I affirm this.

Are you Katsuragi Genji?

I bought cans of coffee from the convenience shop, and went towards the station. The world under the railway was a strange world; every 30 seconds, the train could be heard passing by above, and there were a lot of small bars and stalls cramped there. The sun had yet to set, and most shops had yet to open. The nauseating stench from the hill of trash bags, the crows pecking at the trash, a large number of abandoned, rusted bicycles, homeless seated on them, smoking, being like the precipitate of the city. All these scenes hastened a pedestrian’s footsteps.

However, the situation today differed slightly. There was the face of an elementary school kid tucked amongst the homeless, dressed in camouflage suit and a helmet.

“Vice Admiral Fujishima! Over here!”

Major spotted me opposite the road, and waved at me. The quartet of men chatting away turned to look at me. While wary of the

surrounding stares, I pulled the collar of my jumper, and hurried across the road.

“Everyone, please have some coffee.” The old men reached into the convenience store bag I opened for them, including Ginji-san.

“Why isn’t it beer?” “Well, good for this cold weather.”

“Why are you treating us now, Narumi? Are you planning to end up homeless anytime soon?”

“You can follow Hiro and be a gigolo yourself, guhaha.”

I was flanked by two men, and they ribbed me. Conductor-shi’s was dressed in a suit, his hair a color of black sesame and salt, and might be mistaken for a salaryman. The one with the little beer bottle behind his overalls was probably Marienkhof-shi. I could only obtain a vague impression of everyone, but everyone could remember my appearance and face. What’s going on?

“Narumi, which yakuza are you going to challenge next?”

“The payout was 24 times the last time you challenged the Chinese mafia. Thanks to you, I made a killing.”

“Gamble? I’m not a race horse!”

“Eh? You aren’t talking about that today?” “We heard from Major that you’ll provide us some intel.”

Shocked, I turned to Major. He seemed to be discussing something furiously with Ginji-san and Mori-san, and only for a moment did he look up at me. Through the stare under the visor, I could tell he wanted me to make up something. This guy spread lies using my name to gather the homeless. Left with no choice, I could only speak up.

“Eh, there hasn’t been much going on recently. When we took on the Huang Coalition the last time, Hiro—”

I made up some heroics, and peeked aside at Ginji-san. Really, I couldn’t help but be curious about what they were talking about.

“…I see. Those living in the park and under the bridge were already wiped out. Nobody heard any gunshots, so we can’t tell the gun make from the sounds and the frequency there—”

“Who’s able to tell! It’s not like everyone’s a military nut like you.” Ginji-san noted.

“And it’s so dark. Who’s able to tell whether it’s an air gun or something. I thought I got hit by nails.”

Mori-san rubbed his shoulders as he answered,

“Let’s go check the scene of the crime. Do you know what shoes and equipment were worn?’

“As we said, it’s too dark, and we can’t see.”

“We’re not soldiers. Who cares about such things?”

“In that case, can everyone please carrying this recorder along with you.”

Major seemed to be investigating something with the homeless, and Ginji-san cautiously inspected the watch-sized recorder Major took out from his backpack.

“What’s this? How many microphones have you set up inside?”

“16 directional microphones. I caliberated the angles; it’s my best work.”

“This is too much cost. If you want to mass produce this, you should modulate the recorder and the power source at least.”

“Your thoughts are really profit-oriented, Ginji-san. I never thought of that.”

“How about using the electromagnetic reception from before?”

“Ohh, that can work.”

It sounded as though they were happily chatting. I approached Major silently, pretending to be interested in the conversation, and stared at the devices in their hands.”

“…Ginji-san, you seem to know electronics well. Did you study engineering before?”

It was a straightforward question. Major inadvertently stared right at me; it was a taboo to ask a homeless’ past.

But Ginji-san merely snorted, and answered,

“It was a long time back. Technology has advanced so much though, and I can’t catch up to Hitoshi now.”

“But the thought process will never age. It’s after hearing your words that I’m starting to think going to a research university might be a good idea. Though this will delay my time as a NEET…”

Hearing these words, I suppressed the shock and conflicted feelings within me. Major wanted to go to a research university? He originally declared that he would keep repeating his year until he couldn’t, drop out and become the strongest NEET. On the other hand, it felt as though we were talking about someone else’s matter entirely, as Ginji-san was calling Major Hitoshi. No, the important thing wasn’t about Major, but to hear out from Ginji-san.

“Do you know how to make a recorder, Ginji-san?”

I glanced aside at the recorder in Major’s hand, and nonchalantly asked,

“I can, but it’s not in my expertise.”

“E-erm, your expertise?”

“Making spare parts for cameras.”

I gulped. It was as Yui-san told us, that he worked in a spare parts factory.

“You also mentioned cost and such…were you the owner of a company or something?”

“I did run a business before alright. But why do you seem as though you know?”

“E-erm?” I coughed a few times to hide the awkwardness. It appeared I asked too much, “Just thought of it.”

“If there’s something you want to ask, do it.”

My voice was frozen deep within my throat, bringing some pain. I barely forced myself to swallow it.

I glanced at Major, and found that he had already slipped off to the abandoned bicycles where Mori-san, Conductor and Marienkhof

were, explaining how easy it was to picklock them. He sounded aloof, but he was serious in assisting the investigation.

Again, I faced Ginji-san, and quietly inhaled.

One day, I would have to state the truth to him. Better give up on any tricks now. I rather gain his trust and continue with the investigation than find definite proof on him before explaining about Yui-san.

“Erm, actually, I’m the assistant to a private detective.”

“I know, and so?”

Ah, I guessed so. He knew my name after all.

“A while back, our agency had a customer called Natsuki Yui-san. She’s an artiste. Her actual name is Katsuragi Yuina…she requested us to search for her father.”

I stopped, and watched Ginji-san’s expression. However, his face only showed a stoic look.

“Katsuragi Keiji, that’s the name of the father she told us.”

Again, I paused, waiting for Ginji-san to reply. However, he would not say anything, and I could only hear the noise from the train, the voices of hawkers in cellphone shops, background music from the drug store, exhaust sounds of the passing vehicles, and countless footsteps.

“Yui-san said that she once saw you when she went filming at the park. She suspected that you’re her father.”

“I don’t know.”

Ginji-san sounded as though he was crushing a ball of dirt onto the wall. I was certain that this man was Yui-san’s father.”

“Yui-san says that she wants to be reunited with you.”

“I have no daughter.”

“Just meet and have a talk.”

“I told you I don’t know.”

“Yui-san said that she doesn’t hate her father. She just wants to meet you again. Right, she said that she can help repay the debt.”

Ginji-san threw the empty can of coffee into the basket of a abandoned bicycle, got up, and wrapped the muffler around his neck.

“Thank you for the invite, but I’m leaving.”

”Wait! Please wait!”

I wanted to give chase after Ginji-san only, to hit my thigh onto the bicycle, and nearly toppled over an entire row of them as I barely managed to hold onto it.

“Ginji-san, where are you staying right now?”

“I don’t have a place to stay. Are you an idiot?”

“I-I know that. That’s not what I mean. I’m asking how to contact you again.”

I couldn’t allow the conversation to end in such dire situation. Even though I felt that I could be rejected, I had to seize my only chance.

“Go ask Hitoshi.”

Ginji-san straggled a trolley of dirty bags, and went towards the shadows under the bridge. For every step he took, I felt the silhouette of his back shrinking. Thus, I could only stop my hands from holding the bicycle and watch him leave beyond the horizon.

Ginji-san’s departing footsteps were finally overcome by the noises of the train.

I inadvertently hugged myself and shivered. Was the sudden cold due to the buildings, or because I just recalled that it was Winter already?

“Ginji-san left already?”

I turned to look at the source of the voice, and found that Mori-san and the others were already behind me.

“It’s rare to have a young guest treat us, and he went off.”

“That man’s always scowling.”

“I never saw him smile before.”

“When was that time when Ginji-san went to the job agency in all our stead, and we treated him? Even then, he wouldn’t smile…”

“Let’s have a bet! First to make Ginji-san smile will take all.”

“That’ll be a huge wager!”

The old men stared at everyone’s tanned faces, and grinned.

The trio probably sensed that Ginji-san and I were talking about something serious, but nobody asked us. Everyone’s deliberate obliviousness gave me a real sense of warmth, which I guess would be similar to keeping something warm with vacuum? Impossible. What exactly was I thinking?

Immediately afterwards, someone tapped me on the shoulder. I turned around, and found Major with his goggles and helmet lifted, looking on with innocent eyes.

“The sudden investigation failed?”

“Well, yeah…” I lowered my shoulders. I felt apologetic to Major, who finally managed to bring Ginji-san to me. “Ginji-san can’t go back to the park now, can he? Hasn’t the construction work started?”

“No, he’ll come by once in a while. It’s a little complicated though.”

Major started to explain the situation of the park to me.

The construction started 4 days back. There were still many homeless huts in the park, and they started work in a somewhat threatening manner. It’s only due to the civilian groups increasing the frequency of protests that the construction work got delayed again. At this point, the park was fenced up, and the plan to modify it to a sports park was paused again.

“Hercules can’t possibly give up on its business plans just because of some protets, and it’s now the cooldown phase. They’ll start work again, so Ginji-san had to move away before then.”

“That’ll be bad. If they move, how can I find them?’

“Don’t worry.”

Major tapped me on the shoulder.

“I’ve grasped the waste recycling company and the shops Ginji-san frequent, and I have Mori-san’s contact, so I’ll be able to find out where everyone lives. Also, for the time being, I’ll be patrolling around specific places.”

“Eh?” I stared at Major’s face. Specific places here would refer to the places the homeless stayed at. “Why patrol? Because of this request?”

“What are you saying now? I’m investigating on the one who shot the homeless.”

“Ah…”

I glanced aside to peek at the three old men, holding coffee and chatting about gambling eagerly.

“I investigated all the places this week, and obtained lots of evidence.”

Major took out a few transparent plastic bags filled with BB bullets and dirt-covered metal scraps.

“These aren’t things any ordinary person will throw. Must be some maniac who loves to play survival games. This is a small world for us gamers, I’ll be able to catch him soon.”

I felt something was amiss. Why was Major so insistent on figuring out who shot the homeless? He was on good terms with Ginji-san and the others, and he naturally would be angry about it.

But despite this, it wasn’t like Major.

…Why was Major not being himself?

I shook my head to shake off such thoughts. What did I know about Major? We only knew each other for more than a year, and only met at the detective agency. How could I possibly understand the passions and darkness hidden inside his diminutive body.

“…Anything I can help with?”

Major stopped, and turned his head back.

“I can’t ask you for help, Vice Admiral Fujishima. This isn’t a

request."

"I know it isn't, but—" I was at a momentary loss of words, and tried to find excuses, "Anyway, I just hope that you'll let me participate. If we can nab the culprit…it'll be like owing a favour, but I guess Ginji-san would be more willing to talk to me."

It was an excuse based on the heart. But actually, what I was really curious was—why was Major being so anxious?'

"Vice Admiral Fujishima, have you heard of the organizational theory by General Hans von Seeckt?"

"No, I don't." I muttered. Why this out of a sudden.

"Your lack of hard work really is something to lament. Seeckt was limited by the harsh regulations of the Treaty of Versailles to downsize the military, but with his intelligence and indomitable will, he managed to rebuild the German Army, and insisted on the military being a pillar of civilian governance. He resisted defied Hitler until the very end."

"W-wait, Major. Don't make a speech in the middle of the streets. Everyone's watching."

Major ignored my protests, and raised 4 fingers in front of me.

"According to Seeckt, soldiers can be classified into 4 different kinds. The lazy and smart, the hardworking and smart, the lazy and stupid, and the hardworking and stupid." For every category he listed, Major bent a finger.

"…Ah."

"The lazy and smart ones are suited to lead the frontlines. Scared of death, that guy will try his best to think of a way to win easily. For example, I'm of this category. The Major's a camp commander."

In other words, a willing NEET. Anyway, what's Major talking about? Did this have to do with me?"

"The hardworking and smart are more inclined to be advsiors. They need smarts to come up with plans, and willingness to work hard for the preparations . For example, Yondaime's this kind of person."

Really? Right when I was being sceptical, Major pointed at my nose.

“As for the lazy idiots, they’re suited to be commanders. Never doing anything, and just need to nod and what others say. In other words, you’re the type of person, Vice Admiral.”

I gulped, unable to refute. In any case, I let Major finish what he wanted to say.

But despite this, I cautiously asked,

“…Then, what about the fourth kind? The hardworking idiots?”

“it’s better if they don’t exist. They work for the wrong purpose, and only serve to spread the damage. What I want to say is that I don’t want you to go from being a lazy idiot to a hardworking idiot.”

I knew I shouldn’t have asked…feeling limp, I sat down on the backseat of a bicycle.

“Well, only the Japanese would have known of such stupid words. Guess it’s made up.”

“What’s with the long talk then!? You wasted my time!”

Major waved at me, and left. I watched him vanish down the path below the bridge, and again sat back on the back seat of the abandoned bicycle. Looking back, I found the 3 other homeless folk had vanished. The sun was setting, and the long shadows of the bicycle and I fell onto the railway. A chilling wind ruffled the convenience store bag.

I buttoned up my duffle coat, and stood up.

I waited until the following day, after school, before deciding to give Yui-san a call.

She’s the client this time, and no matter the outcome, I had to report to her. However, when I went to ‘Hanamaru’, there would surely be people trying to talk to me. Thus, I called Yui-san immediately once I got out of the classroom.

“Sorry, I’m on the road now!”

I could hear the noise of a road in the background of Yui-san’s voice.

“I’ll call you again later. Sorry.”

I stared at the phone right after the call ended, and reflected on my actions. She’s a blooming idol, and very busy at that. Calling her at this point would be harassing her.

I sent her a message, briefly reporting on Ginji-san. It was about how I confronted Ginji-san about Yui-san, only to be denied. However, we got intel on his whereabouts, and I would continue to try and convince him. These words were difficult to express directly, but after conveying into a message, I could easily send it to her.

I rode the bicycle out of school, and the cellphone in my pocket vibrated. This time, it’s from Yui-san.

“I’ll have some time later. I’ll be going to the ramen shop later. I have something to hand over to you.”

I remained leaned on the pillar of the school gate, bending over from the bicycle as I read the message thrice. I sighed, and closed the phone.

I guess I had to explain to her directly after all.

There was the silhouette of a tall, lanky man in the kitchen of ‘Hanamaru’ that was preparing to open. Black rubber bands were used to roll up his lemon yellow shirt, and he was sorting out the dried goods in the cardboard boxes. Only Hiro could wear such a striking shirt without feeling out of place, and even in the entertainment industry, not many could do so.

“Narumi-kun! I heard that there’s some really amazing person with the request this time?”

Hiro noticed me pass through the curtains, and lifted his head, saying,

“Alice told me, and I was shocked. When that girl debuted on a gravure photo on Young Jump, I knew that Natsuki Yui would strike it big one day.”

Hiro’s the only one in my circle of relations who was familiar with the entertainment circle, *I think I should really leave everything to*

Hiro, for a moment, that was my thought.

“I’ll come back to work again. This time, I’ll be able to get a chance to meet Yui-chan.”

“I’m definitely not letting you to meet her….” I sighed, and sat in front of the counter. “So you aren’t going to be a gigolo leeching on Yi Ling-san now? She’ll be angry knowing that you’re popping by at ‘Hanamaru’ often, right?”

“Ahh, I was shooed out from Yi Ling’s room.” Hiro chuckled, “Well, I know a Chinese madame, you know? Right now, I’m living in an apartment she bought for me. I haven’t lived alone for quite a while, so I got really bored.”

“You’re utterly terrible!”

“No, Narumi-kun, I pale in comparison to you.”

What? Don’t say such things that can be misunderstood, okay? However, Hiro went back to the cardboard boxes.

“Min-san, do I wash the turtle leg? I can grill the fish jaw.”

Hiro shouted into the corridor of the kitchen, and at this moment, a lady with a ponytail showed up from there. It seemed Min-san was inside, preparing the broth.

“Then you can boil the pork belly—” Min-san instructed, only to stop midway through and walk out to the kitchen, “…No need for that. Why did you enter the kitchen again, you gigolo bastard?’

“No, I just thought I should help you with work.”

“You’re no longer an employee. And how are you able to just show up in front of me without a care in the world?”

“Why not? That madame bought an apartment for me, but my heart belongs to you, Min-san.”

After that, Hiro got chased out, literally kicked up and sent rolling from the back door. I hurried out, and went to the back.

“Owwww.”

Hiro rubbed his backside, and I helped him up onto the old stack of tires.

“That punch from Min-san’s really powerful. That’s worse than when I got beaten up by Hong Lei.”

“You reap what you sow…”

Didn’t he propose to Min-san? What was he thinking?

“Well, as long as I don’t give up, Min-san will understand my feelings.”

“You’re saying such innocent words for a gigolo.”

A fuming Min-san suddenly rushed out from the back door, and Hiro instinctively raised his hands to protect his head.

But Min-san did not show up to beat him, instead putting a large metal bowl on the wooden table between Hiro and me. There was a hill of garlic there, some even falling out.

“Hiro, peel them all! Narumi, don’t you dare help him. Let him finish.”

And then, she slammed the back door with enough force to rattle the entire building.

Hiro-san cautiously lowered his arms, and heaved a sigh of relief, before he began to happily peel the garlic.

It’s a strange relationship between those two. Nobody around us gave Hiro a chance of succeeding in his pursuit of love, but Min-san never rejected him outside, and seeing them like this, I felt a vague feeling of both gaudiness and relief.

I felt that Hiro would continue wandering around the many girls out there, and occasionally come back to ‘Hanamaru’ from time to time. In other words, this is Hiro’s home. It’s not the posh apartment the filthy rich madame bought for him, and neither was it the simple apartment of a hostess. His home was at Min-san’s shop.

Thus—this was the difference between the NEETs and the homeless.

“…Did you talk to Ginji-san?”

Hiro stopped, and asked me.

“Eh? Ah, yes. Sorta.”

It seemed Hiro already knew about the request somewhat, and I didn't have to explain.

"Is he really the father?"

"I couldn't be sure. Ginji-san insisted that he didn't know, that he doesn't have a daughter. Looking at his reaction though, I guess it's him."

I added on to convince Hiro, and looked down at the ground between my shoes. A brief silence was interrupted by the peeling sounds of garlic.

"That's tough."

Hiro muttered. I lifted my head.

"It's been 10 years since he left his daughter and home. It's going to be difficult for her to salvage anything now."

I too understood this logic. Time would gather all kinds of precipitates, bury wounds and flaws, and coagulate them. It was completely impossible to revert matters to normal. By removing the burden of the wounds, all that would be revealed would be more wounds.

"Even if Ginji-san's really Natsuki Yui's father, the daughter earns enough money for her dad to pay off the debts, and start a new life, it won't be settled that easily."

I know. Right when I was about to answer, I swallowed back my words. Did I really understand? What feelings did Ginji-san have when he left home and wandered all the way to Tokyo? What feelings did he have when I mentioned about Yui-san to him while he was holding that can of coffe? I didn't understand anything at all, I guess.

I guessed Hiro would be more suited for this case. I never heard Hiro mention about his family situation, but he was always wandering around like a drifting plant, and probably understands the homeless better than I do. I guessed he'll be able to explain the conversation Ginji-san and I had to Yui-san without much difficulty.

At this moment, Hiro patted my shoulder,

"But you're the detective's assistant, Narumi-kun."

Hearing that, all I could only do was nod deeply. I felt ashamed for trying to toss a hot potato to Hiro.

“But Major’s helping with this case, right? Both Tetsu and I aren’t taking action because Alice hasn’t told us to, and it looks like Major has been running around alone. I haven’t been able to get him on the phone recently.”

“Ah, erm, that’s because.”

I explained to Hiro the cases of the homeless being shot at, and his beautifully shaped eyebrows scowled slightly.

“Looks like Major’s involved in some trouble again.”

“What was he really serious about? I thought he was joking about the pride of a soldier, but he looked really angry about what the culprit did.”

“Really? I always thought he was serious.”

“Always? He said that attacking non-combatants is the worst possible crime, but this is 21st Century Japan, and an airgun was used.”

“He’s for real, but—”

Hiro stopped peeling the garlic, and his eyes drifted coldly, aimlessly.

“I guess this isn’t the only reason as to why he’s so furious.”

I followed Hiro’s stare, and the grey sky between the buildings got gloomier.

I did see a strange, dangerous presence in Major’s eyes, despite him trying to bluff with some crazy general’s talk.

‘Hanamaru’ was at its busiest after 8pm, filled with all kinds of customers, including the salarymen returning from work, the workers at the construction sites, the guards, the college students headed for the next stall, the old man managing a block of apartments, and some hoodlum-like property dealers. The 5 seats in front of the counter were occupied by the regular customers of drunkards, and the customers unable to enter had to sit on beer

crates turned upside down. The cold drafts from the buildings blew in, and only a small electric heater provided some warmth. Despite this, the lights and red curtains at the doors seemed to attract lots of pedestrians. The crowd showed no signs of abating, and Ayaka alone could not cope with them. Thus, when Min-san popped out of the back door, stating that she was willing to hire for 700 Yen per hour[6], Hiro giddily put on the short black apron and ran into the kitchen. I guessed the rumors spread fast, for an hour later, a large group of young women came by later.

Yui-san just so happened to show up at the ramen shop's busiest moment. Outside the lights of the shop was a silhouette looking around. Looking at the shape of the wool cap, I could tell it was here.

"Over here, over here."

I waved my hand from between the buildings.

"Narumi-kun!"

Yui-san called me with a voice audible to everyone else, probably because she was relieved to see me, and came running over. I put a finger at my mouth to shush her, dragged her to a dark corner at the back door, had her sit on the old tires, and peeked into the shop. Some customers noticed the back door, but none of them noticed that it was Natsuki Yui.

"You can't be loud now. What'll happen if others notice you?"

"So-sorry."

Yui-san shrank back, lowered her sunglasses slightly, and looked up at me, apologizing. I grabbed Yui-san by the shoulders just when she wanted to peek into the shop, dragged her back, and had her sit on the tires.

"The one who drove you off on that day was your manager, right? Did he say anything?"

"A lot of things. Is that your boyfriend? It's a crucial moment now. What are you thinking?"

Ah, I guessed so. She's a rare breed of proper idols in this day and age after all.

“Bu-bu-but don’t be mistaken! You really aren’t my boyfriend though.”

“I know. I’m the victim here!” Why explain this to me?

The back door suddenly opened, and the humid air suddenly blew at my neck.

“Fujishima-kun, is that a customer? Anything she’ll like to order?”

Yui-san lifted her eyes, and just so happened to exchange looks with Ayaka, poking her head out of the door.

“H-huh? E-eh? Th-this is, Natsuki—”

I frantically got to my feet and blocked Ayaka’s line of sight.

“So-sorry, Ayaka. Please pretend that you didn’t see anything.”

And appearing beyond Ayaka’s shoulder was Hiro.

“I heard Yui-chan showed up? Take my place in the kitchen, Narumi-kun. I’ll take over.”

“You guys.”

While Ayaka and Hiro stood side by side, a terrifying growl could be heard behind them, and a fuming Min-san came out to grab her two employees by the back of their collars.

“No skimping on your work! We’re not done delivering the customer’s dishes! She’s not one of our customers!”

Hiro and Ayaka were dragged back into the kitchen, and I really expressed my thanks to Min-san before closing the back door.

“…Sorry, everyone wanted to get involved.”

“W-was I found out? That’s weird. I switched to yellow sunglasses on this day though.”

That makes it more obvious! I really wished Yui-san had some awareness as a celebrity. I brought her to the first stairwell of the emergency staircase.

“But this ramen shop owner really seems amazing.”

Yui-san muttered as she leaned her back on the handrail.

“What’s amazing?”

“The lady with the ponytail’s the shop owner, right? I met her the last time I came by. She’s really a beauty.”

Beauty…? Hm, well, Min-san’s pretty, no doubt about that. I recalled the image of her wearing the wedding dress when she got engaged, and if I did help take a photo of her, it’ll be beautiful. Photos can’t talk or beat people up after all.

“The girl helping at work’s cute too, and there’s also that employee who looks like a Johnny.[7]

“Erm, I’ll be serious about this, don’t you ever approach that guy. He’s not a Johnny, just a gigolo.”

Yui-san blinked a few times, probably overwhelmed by my serious expression, and smiled. I then added on,

“No, this isn’t a laughing matter. He’s really a terrible gigolo.”

“Sorry, I’m laughing because you said the exact same words as Washio-san.”

Washio would refer to that fierce looking manager, right?

“He said he could tell from your face that you’re a gigolo, Narumi-kun, that I shouldn’t be approaching you.”

“From my face!? We only just met!”

“Ahh, I don’t have the time to chat. I came out for a while after an event ended. I still have to rush back later.”

“Next time, say that earlier! Erm.”

I hurriedly pondered about what to say next, and continued on,

First, about that homeless man called Ginji-san.

I did tell Ginji-san that we accepted a request from Natsuki Yui—Katsuragi Yuina.

And Ginji-san’s response were, “I don’t know.” “I have no daughter.”

And finally, though he had no fixed place to live at, we could find him if we did some investigations.

Yui-san kept biting her lower lip as she listened to my report quietly. Once I was done, she merely nodded,

“I’ll go back to talk to Ginji-san later. Anything you want me to say to him? Oh yeah, didn’t you say you have something to pass to him?”

Yui-san reached her hand into her handbag, and took out a box smaller than a palm. She opened the box that was wrapped in red velvet, and there was a ring embedded halfway in it.

“…So the thing you said you want to hand him is this?”

“Yes. This is my dad’s wedding ring. He left this ring by my bedside before he left home.”

The words ‘Kenji Katsuragi’ were clearly imprinted on the inside of the ring. I looked up at the side of Yui-san’s face; did she see her dad leave home?

“I was awake back then, but I overslept, and I wasn’t sure what dad left behind, or why he left home…and I just went back to sleep.”

Yui-san’s eyes were hidden under the sunglasses, and she looked up at the distant night sky.

“Every day, he would work until it was late at night, and mom and I were used to sleeping early. My biggest impression of him would be him sliding the fusuma slightly to peek in, and see my upside down face. He would head to the factory every morning, and it wasn’t uncommon to not see him for 3 days straight.”

Her voice sounded as though it was beyond a curtain.

“But back then, I was just a kid, and I didn’t know the factory was in dire states, or that I ever thought that dad would vanish. It was almost Christmas, and I kept telling him to stay at home when it was Christmas. Ahaha, I was like an idiot.”

Yui-san wiped her eyes with her fingers a few times.

“Mom seemed to have known too. She knew immediately what happened on that day. There was the ring by the bed, and the

money at home was gone."

But she didn't request to look for him. Yui-san showed a hollow smile.

"After dad vanished, mom spent the next 3 days spaced out on a chair, sometimes laughing. She hardly did anything, and the people at the factory helped report to the police to search for him."

The weather got colder, and I looked away from Yui-san's face as I leaned on the handrail. The bustling lights between the buildings looked surreal.

"So, please hand the ring over to him."

Yui-san pushed the box to me.

"And told me that mom's ring is with me."

I heard from Yui-san that her mother kept cursing the husband for leaving such a huge debt behind and abandoned the factory and family. I firmly held onto this hard sensation in my palm, and it still continued some warmth from Yui-san.

"I know it's bad to ask you to lie, but please ell dad that mom wasn't angry with him, that she wanted to meet him until the very end."

Yui-san and I looked over at the night sky, in the same direction, and I nodded to her.

A lazy idiot like me would be more suited to convey such a stupid, harmless lie. It would be great if Ginji-san could open his heart a little to me.

The sound of a cellphone echoed in the chilly night, and Yui-san's shoulders shook in shock as she hurriedly took it out. However, she merely stared at the phone, and did not receive the call.

"…Ahh, what do I do? Washio-san's definitely angry with me now."

"You got to go back now, I just said that there's still things to do, more or less."

"Yes…that's right."

Yui-san closed her phone, and slipped into into her handbag.

“What do I do? Do I have some ramen before going back? I heard that the ice cream here is really good, right?”

“What are you saying? Your manager’s going to come right at us!”

“Well, I have to go back, I guess…”

Yui-san leaned her back on the backrest, and bent down. What’s with her? Did she not want to return to her manager than much? I couldn’t see her expression, but that ball of wool on her cap was still bobbling.

On the other end of the silence were the cheerful sounds of the customers, mixed with the vibration of the phone. Yui-sna shrank even further, and waited for it to stop.

“…I’ll rest for a while longer. Washio-san won’t know that I’m here.”

I sighed, and scratched my head.

“Erm, Yui-san, did the company issue the phone to you?”

I asked, and Yui-san tilted her head slightly towards me, showing a shocked look.

“Yes…but why?”

“I guess the company had a GPS function installed in the phone.”

“G—P—S?”

“A function that uses the satellites to check on a phone’s location—erm, anyway, the manager can figure out where you are through this function, Yui-san.”

If this idol talent was being so unstable, there would be no doubt she would be forced to use this phone, and thus, it would explain why the manager would suddenly show up in front of us that weekend night. Hearing this from me, Yui-san got pale, and stood up.

“Wh-what do I do? Just destroy the phone?”

“I said, just hurry back now! Also, give a call to your manager later!”

“U, uu, yes, I guess…”

Yui-san lowered her shoulders dejectedly, and began walking down the stairs.

She’s a dangerous one, I thought as I watched her leave from behind. Her emotional state was highly unstable, and how was she like in front of the cameras? I never saw her on TV before, but I could imagine her going crazy. I got increasingly worried, hoping that she could report good news to me next time.

I looked back at the little box in my palm. Thinking about it, I was really entrusted with something really significant. Would Ginji-san really accept this? Even if I made a flawless lie, he might be able to see through it.

I supposed I should at least report to Alice, but right when I was about to head up the stairs, I heard frantic footsteps from above. Following that was a blue petite body, and glossy black hair swaying in the night.

“Narumi! Why are you taking your t—”

Alice exchanged looks with me, and stood on the taller stairwell, looking too embarrassed to say anything. She looked beyond me, and down the stairs. I turned around to look, and saw Yui-san peeking outside before walking out of the alley.

“…You spent time talking with the client again?”

I turned back due to the seething anger in Alice’s voice.

“Seriously, you would rather talk to Natsuki Yui than report to me whenever she shows up…”

“Not at all. Yui-san didn’t have much time, and I didn’t have anything to report to you directly, so we had a talk here.”

“Nn, mph.”

“You threw a tantrum and came running out of the office the last time.”

“I wasn’t angry.”

“Yeah, maybe, I get it.”

I had an idea, and after peeking at the back door of 'Hanamaru', I found that Yui-san was gone.

"W-what is it?"

Alice's voice got shrill.

"You're Natsuki Yui's fan, right? You wanted to talk to her, right?"

Alice froze, her mouth partially agape, and even late at night, I could tell her face was turning beetroot.

"…I-I had enough! Why are you coming up with such stupid ideas!? Even a Russian who drank two bottles of Vodka is able to talk better than you!"

"I just had a thought…"

"Whatever, don't you enter the office for the time being. Report to me through mail, so that I won't be infected by your stupidity!"

"Got it." I shrugged. I was always infuriating Alice for some strange reasons anyway.

I heard Alice teeter up the stairs, and turned my back on her before returning to the back door. I would not do as she told me, to send her a mail once I got home. Having been her assistant for a year, I could deduce what she would do next. Thus, I sat on a beer crate in the cold, damp darkness between the buildings, wheezing.

And as I expected, 5 minutes later, I had the intro melody to 'Colorado Bulldog'.

"I ran out of Doctor Pepper. Get me two crates of them and come back! Ah, I didn't call you because I knew you were downstairs, and not because I was watching you on the surveillance cameras!"

Okay, okay, I said as I stood up. Even I was feeling confused as to why I was relieved by this.

The next day, after school, I met Ginji-san at the park. A fence was set up at the steps of the park entrance, but there was a man in trench coat opposite the abandoned cardboard house. I parked my bicycle by the road, and wanted to slip in through the fence, only to

find someone else talking to Ginji-san.

“…So right now, it’s an important moment for Yui. Do you understand?’

I heard a man’s harsh voice, and stopped going up the stairs to crouch down instead.

“Getting suspected would be a bad thing. I don’t want someone like you to show up beside her now!”

“I said that I understand, didn’t I? This has nothing to do with me.”

“Then, please hurry up and leave. If the civilian groups start protesting again, the TV stations will start filming here again.

“So what?’

“Don’t you understand? Hercules is promoting Yui heavily right now! Soon after, there’s going to be a large display out there airing advertisements and promotional videos of Yui. If you got caught on camera, anyone who knows you may recognize you as Yuio’s father.”

The man closed in on Ginji-san, and only then did I see his face clearly. It was the manager, Washio-san.

“You’re annoying. Just go back already.” Ginji-san shoved him on the shoulder.

“Is it money? If it’s money, I have as much as you need.”

“I don’t need it. I do have my own situation. It’s not as simple as me moving just because you say so.”

But despite this, Washio-san took out a large bundle of notes from his wallet, and shoved it into Ginji-san’s coat.

“Anyway, hurry up and go! Don’t show up in front of Yui-san again.”

Washio-san poked a finger at Ginji-san’s chest, and then turned around to head down the stairs, resulting in me being unable to hide. He got down the stairs, and stopped in his tracks, meeting me in the eyes while I was foolishly trying to hide by getting down onto the ground.

“Are you still doing your investigations?”

Washio-san nudged his glasses, sounding really frustrated. He walked towards me, and I could only stand up to dust the dirt off my knees.

“Yui told me everything the previous day.”

“Everything, as in?”

“Whatever Yui requested to you. Don’t go overboard in your detective games, we’re being serious about work here. It’ll probably get Yui hundreds of millions.”

I merely shrugged. As a detective assistant, I had an obligation to keep secrets for my clients. It was possible that the manager was just trying to fish something out from me. He coughed, and returned to the stairs.

“It would have been fine if Yui was mistane, but that homeless man really appeared to be her father. Damn it!”

Washio-san bitterly grumbled, and turned back to look at me.

“Listen, there’s a lot of ways to get you to shut up.”

He went by me, and descended the stairs. During the entire time, I did not look back, and quietly stood on the stairs, waiting for the footsteps to depart. Only when I heard the sound of a car engine being activated did I turned around, and the blue-purple car, parked at the dirt road at the bottom of the hill, exited through the pedestrian walkway, accelerated, and shrank.

I continued climbing the stairs, and saw Ginji-san standing under a treet, his hands in his pockets as he watched the car leave.

“What do you want?”

Ginji-san said those words, and returned to his cardboard house. I ducked past the fense, and caught up to him. There were lots of evergreen trees grown in the park, and between the trees were plywood, blue vinyl sheets and cardboards everywhere. The sun shone above us, but the place was filled with a gloomy atmosphere. The water cooler in the middle of the park oozed no water, for the tap was wrapped in metal wire and tape. There was no other person to be seen around here.

“You’re going to say the same things as him, right? Stop bothering me, leave.”

Ginji-san said, and ducked into the entrance of the cardboard house, starting to sort the empty cans he picked up from the black trash bags. I slowly approached his slender self.

“Yui-san—Yuina-san asked me to give something to you.”

The figure dressed in the trench coat did not waver because of my words. He maintained his usual poise, and continued searching for empty cans from the trash bags, and once he found some, he put them into a transparent plastic bag. I sat down beside him.

When I took out the ring box to show Ginji-san, he finally stopped. The heavy look in his eyes caused me to be unable to open it.

“You left this behind when you left the house. To give it to dad, she said.”

The black stained hands started sorting the empty cans. I ostensibly tasted aluminium as I continued,

“Do you know…that Yui-san’s mother has already passed away?”

Ginji-san again stopped what he was doing, and stared at my face.

He combed his messy hair backwards, stood up, took out a cigarette from his mouth, stared at the metal fence, and had a smoke. I waited for a while, and he remained silent. The purple and white smoke remained stuck on the thin lens of his glasses and the dried hair, almost in a longing manner.

“Yui-san’s mother didn’t begrudge you for leaving…she always wanted to meet you again.”

“Did Yuina ask you to make such a stupid lie?”

I gasped, and swallowed a sigh. As expected, I was seen through.

No, well, there was still some development. At the very least Ginji-san admitted that he’s Katsuragi Yuina’s father.

“I don’t know whether that’s a lie or not.”

I continued on with a stoic face,

“But Yui-san really wanted to meet you again. Even if it’s just once, please meet her again and talk with her.”

Ginji-san slowly puffed out some smoke, gnawed at the cigarette, squatted down, and placed the plastic bag full of cans onto a cart.

“Do you want to know why I left home?”

“…I heard that it was because of the debts. The factory didn’t seem to be performing well.”

Ginji-san turned his face away from me, and snorted,

“Because I got sick of it all.”

I stared at Ginji-san’s sidelong profile.

“It wasn’t as bad as being unable to issue payslips to the employees, and I didn’t explain to them about it. I could try and go to a few more loan sharks, but I got sick of it. I left simply because I got sick of bearing responsibility for my family and company.”

Ginji-san threw the cigarette onto the sofa, and stomped on it a few times.

“Do you think I’ll be happy to meet her again? Don’t be stupid.”

Ginji-san pulled his muffler up, and pushed the cart towards the stairs at the exit of the park. I gave chase after him.

“Please wait, at least—”

“Stop pestering me.”

“The ring! It belongs to you, at least. I was told to hand it over to you.”

“I don’t need it.”

At this moment, I finally found myself to be slightly furious. You’re the one who abandoned your family, took a huge debt and ran off, right! Do you know how much that mother and daughter suffered? It’s all your fault, and you’re acting like that! That Yui-san too, why didn’t she request us just to be able to beat her dad up and grumble a bunch? If she said that, I could have gotten Tetsu-senpai involved without worry to tie him up alive. Why did she just want to meet her father and talk a little?

The unexpected surge of rage left me speechless. Ironically, what I did this time was exactly the same as that manager Washio-san. I merely grabbed at the hem of Ginji-san's coat, and shoved the ring box into the pocket.

Ginji-san raised his hand, and slapped my hand away.

His dirty eyes were glaring at me, and I, left with nothing to say, could only retreat. He glanced at the pocket that was a lump at this point, and turned his back on me, lifting the cat as he headed down the stairs. The sound of cans clashing echoed emptily, gradually departing.

The next day, the homeless returned to the park. I received a notification from Major at around 8pm, and brought some Japanese beer and 'Hanamaru' dumplings to the park. I could see a weak light shining on the blue vinyl sheets and several people beyond the fence that to cordon people away.

Even till this point, I was worrying, *Is it fine to come in? We won't get scolded by the police?*

"Vice Admiral Fujishima! Over here!"

The smallest silhouette waved at me. I had no choice but to duck under the fence, and climb up the stairs.

"Oh, Min-san's dumplings."

"Aren't the dumplings made by Hiro nowadays?"

Major and the homeless scented upon the fragrance coming from the plastic container in my hands, and approached me.

"Beer too. You're getting smart there, Narumi."

"Erm…where's Ginji-san?"

I scanned the dark park, and found that the tent village was still quiet. The only ones present were Major, Mori-san and Pe-san.

"He went somewhere to do some teardown work." Pe＝san said. It appeared that he was lucky enough to have some work on this day.

"I too finally managed to get a picking job at a logistics center."

Mori-san patted his bald head with his hand, and grumbled,

“There wasn’t much work, so I was shooed back before noon, and got only half the salary. I was so angry, and I could only snatch lots of cardboard from the furnace.”

Looking down, I found that there were a lot of cardboard that were slightly charred in Mori-san’s cart. The homeless were really a bunch of determined people. It was only recently that I realized that the homeless were really hardworking, not to be lumped with the NEETs.

“Will Ginji-san return here after he’s done with work?”

“Probably, but I don’t know what time it will be.” Mori-san scratched his head as he said this.

“He was sick, so he didn’t have to force himself to do manual labor. He could work as an instructor instead.”

Hearing Pe-san’s words, Mori-san and Major nodded. Ginji-san was sick? He didn’t look well, but Mori-san and Pe-san both had wrinkles and ash on their faces; they didn’t look healthy either.

“Ginji-san hasn’t had a fixed home these days. When he can’t sleep because it’s too cold, he would just walk around.”

Major grabbed a dumpling with his hand and gnawed at it as he said this. I widened my eyes; no wonder he was sick.

“We can only stay here until next week.”

Pe-san said that, and turned around to inspect the tents behind him.

“No matter how delayed the work is, they’ll definitely start work at the end of the year, latest.”

“How’s the situation of the park now? Any developments?”

Major shrugged upon hearing my question.

“Sooner or later, they’re going to use the administration laws to lock down the park, remove the fence and start work. It might look like it has nothing to do with the protests, but Hercules said that they would keep the old name of the park.”

“…Why’s everyone so against rebuilding the park?”

“I don’t know. Ask them.” Pe-san chuckled. Mori-san looked a little gloomy, and told us the details,

“This place has always been like this, and not really a park. The only area that could be used was the futsal court, and at night, we would be the only ones passing through. The city council had been trying to chase us out for a while already, actually.”

Mori-san took out a wrinkled cigarette, lit a fire, and took a smoke.

“It probably started from Sprig this year, when the city council started beautifying the park. You see, the street lamps are new now, aren’t they?”

I lifted my head up, and looked at where Mori-san was pointing. The mini crystal-like lamps were glittering atop a tall pillar beside the fence. It was true that it felt out of place here.

“They cleaned up the graffiti on the wall, the murals and had more flower beds planted here. Of course, we wouldn’t move away that easily.”

“This guy here is really stubborn. Pe-san pointed his chin at the tents, “They can’t be moved easily, and the city council hasn’t really chased us away, so we ignored them.”

“But the town council only started chasing people away for real after the fire in August, right?”

Major interrupted,

“Ahh, yes. It’s probably due to the fire in August.” Pe-san said, “The trash, cardboard, and a house got burned down. So this fire was blamed on us…”

The homeless felt that the city council hardened their stance after the fire, and quickly sold the land to Hercules Company as a park in name to renovate into a sports park.

This announced plan for this area was to develop this place into ‘an area for youth culture to be expressed’, and the renovation of the park itself was probably part of it. Ironically, the spokesman for this plan was Natsuki Yui, the daughter of a homeless, Ginji-san, who had his home robbed by the plan.

“If they really start tearing down the place for real, what will you

do?”

Major lowered his voice, saying this,

“If you need any weapons to fight back, I can lend you some and teach you some fighting techniques.”

“Idiots, we won’t be doing anything.” Mori-san puffed some smoke out of his nostrils. “Once our houses are taken down, we’re running away.”

“You’re running away? But isn’t this your home?”

“That’s not a home. We’re homeless. Listen. We’re home, less.”

I was taken aback due to Mori-san’s sudden aggressiveness, and stared at his face.

“Some call us wanderers, unemployed, or beggars. Some stand up for us, saying that those are words of prejudice, that we should be called street buddies. But I think calling us ‘homeless’ will be the most accurate in this case.”

It was about half an hour later when Ginji-san returned to the park. Mori-san, Pe-san, and Major gulped down what was about a liter of beer, and they, being all drunk, were starting to excitedly discuss exaggerated topics like covering Himeji Castle with carboard, building a Rolls Royce with vinyl sheets, and empty cans to build an F-22 and so on. I had enough of it, and got up to turn away, only to hear footsteps.

The silhouette entered my sights, and I saw messy hair and the glasses reflecting the flect.

“What are you doing? Stop fooling around.”

“Ah, Captain Ginji’s back! Sorry for finishing all the rations!”

Major saluted to Ginji-san with a reddened face. They really did finish up all the dumplings. Ginji-san glanced at the drunkards, and glanced at me.

“…What? More things to talk to me?”

“N-nothing.”

I averted my eyes swimmingly. I did say what I had to, but I had yet to report to Yui-san.

“Can I message Yui-san right now? Tell her that you’re here, Ginji-san?”

“You can, but I’ll be gone after this.”

Ginji-san looked annoyed, and sat on a cardboard box laid on the floor. Mori-san and pe-san were drunk and collapsed onto the floor, while Major offered the bottle of beer that was almost finished to Ginji-san. The latter received it, pulled his muffler down, and took a swung at it. I, still perturbed, continued holding the phone.

“You’re being foolish here. Couldn’t you have just sent it discreetly?”

Ginji-san lifted his eyes and said to me, but I shook my head. Even if I did send the message discreetly, it was pointless. Yui-san’s request wasn’t just about us finding someone. I sighed, and closed the phone. With Yui-san being so busy, she wouldn’t be able to make it in time even if I did send a message to her.

“Just ignore the obtuse Vice Admiral Fujishima for now.”

Major pushed me aside, and sat in front of Ginji-san.

“I have something ask of you, Captain Ginji.”

“What is it?”

“It’s about the shooting of the homeless, of course!” Major took out a flat laptop from his backpack, and the monitor showed a map near the station. “I haven’t been able to gather the intel successfully. I can’t grasp where all the homeless are, and everyone isn’t willing to help you.”

“That’s because everyone feels that you’re like those brats, Hitoshi. When you’re dressed up like that, you’ll be mistaken, and your bag definitely has a whole lot of air guns.”

Major was shocked, and lowered his head to look at his military getup, furiously patting the chest of his camouflage uniform.

“Don’t lump me with them! This is the uniform of the famous British Army!”

“Who knows?”

“Anyway, Ginji-san, can you please help me sort out every homeless around here? They’re your subordinates.” “They’re not my subordinates.” “I’m willing to be a military advisor and explain what to do when they’re attacked, so please lead them.” “I said they aren’t my subordinates.”

Suddenly, a sound interrupted that conversation that was going nowhere. The dried pelting sound could be heard in the knight, flicking the sand grains. Major was the first to react, and put his little body in camouflage suit onto the ground.

“Get down!”

Major shouted, and I too cupped my head with my hands, while Ginji-san clicked his tongue and hid at the trees. Major remained on the ground as he dragged Mori-san and Pe-san, still rolling about on the ground, to a cover of the shelter. A dry sound again grazed by my ear, and I found a stinging hot pain from my neck to my shoulder, causing me to collapse onto the sandy ground.

“Vice Admiral Fujishima!”

Major came running over, grabbed my arm, and at the next moment, I was dragged forcefully into the shadows. I remained lying on the ground, touching my aching neck. Was that really the damage from an air gun? I could feel an icicle stabbing at me despite me wearing a duffle coat. Was that really just a toy gun?

The shooting sounds got dull, and I found that it was because the bullets were shooting through the wall on the other side. At this moment, I was startled, the other side? Opposite the fence was the railway! Where’s the shooter firing from?

The sounds of the passing train overwhelmed the gunshots. I stopped breathing, closed my eyes, and quietly waited for the passing train to move down the tracks. Finally, it was quiet all around again.

I opened my eyes.

5 people frozen in fear were hidden in a corner of Ginji-san’s tent. Major was the first to stand up, and he poked his head out from a corner of the tent to observe the railway opposite the fence; beside me, Ginji-san coughed a few times.

“U…n?” “It’s noisy…”

And the two drunkards continued stleeping, rolling about.

“It’s too dangerous. Don’t show yourself now.” Major said, “Ginji-san, can I check your tent?”

“What do you want?”

The bullet shot through the tent, and I want to take back the bullet. Looking at the angles they’re fired, I can guess where the shots came from.”

“Do whatever you want.”

“They’re probably fired from a building opposite the railway…” Major glared at the shadows opposite the fence, and I felt a chill.

“Can an airgun really fire that far?”

I rubbed my aching neck as I asked. Major turned around, pulling down his goggles for some reason, and narrowed his eyes.

“The largest effective range of an air gun is 50m, and impossible to shoot through cardboard. In other words, they aren’t using toy guns now.”

Major grabbed my collar, opened my coat. From the reflection of his goggles, I could see red marks on the neck.

“Looks like there’s another reason as to why I can’t ignore this.”

That Saturday evening, I received a message from Yui-san.

Ever since the last time I reported to her, I couldn’t call her, and I did not receive a reply to my message. I thought I finally managed to get through to her, but the message stated 'Come to the studio so that we can talk directly’. What was she thinking? I’m not involved in the entertainment industry.

But it was a request from the client, and I couldn’t ignore it. If I went off without telling Alice, she would be infuriated for some strange reason, so I decided to report beforehand.

“Then hurry up and go! Enjoy yourself while you watch an idol live

performance."

Alice, still on the bed, glared at me as she said this,

"I won't. I'm not interested in that. I'm going to work."

"How passionate you are about work." There was spite in her words, "Then bring these things over to her."

I tucked the things Alice prepared into the bag, and left the office.

The slope linking to the west side of the station was filled with lots of people and vehicles, and as I rode the bicycle up the slope, I got honked at, while the hem of my duffle coat latched onto some pedestrians from time to time. A slight turn to the left in the middle of the slope was the office of Hirasaka-gumi, so I was familiar with the area. However, I hardly went beyond there. I made a wrong turn, and was lost for quite a while.

By the time I arrived at the studio building, it was way beyond the 5.30pm meeting time we agreed on. The intimidating, new building was at least 10 levels tall. I could not find a parking rack, and could only park my bicycle by the road before entering through the automatic doors. Once I entered, I felt stares from the people I passed by, and I was inadvertently grateful that it was a Saturday. If it had been an ordinary weekday, I would be chased out due to my school uniform.

The atrium hall was 3 levels high, akin to a posh hotel, and there were several large chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. The four escalators right in front of me reached high up like black waterfalls. I saw the bulletin board, and found that not only were there studios, but also event stages of all sizes, offices and gyms. Many people were passing each other in the hall, and I was momentarily overwhelmed by the atmosphere in the hall, unable to move.

I recovered, and went to the reception to the right. The lady receptionist nodded at me with a completely professional face, but when I timidly said, "Erm, I'm looking for Natsuki Yui-san. This is Fujishima." The receptionist's smile seemed to be stained by a fog.

While the receptionist was making a call, I leaned at the edge of the counter, watching the crowd moving in the hall. Suddenly, I heard a voice behind me, "Hey, you."

Me? I turned around, wondering, and found a fierce looking man

with light shades standing behind me. I was so startled, I nearly exclaimed and jolted in shock.

“Quiet. Come with me.”

It was Washio, the manager. He was dressed in a cream colored suit and a mustard colored shirt, not wearing a tie. He really resembled a yakuza member. I never expected him to show up out of a sudden, and cringed, only to be grabbed by him on the arm and dragged to the elevator.

“Eh, ah, I-I just so happened to come by today.”

“Enough with those stupid excuses. Yui ltold me.”

“Eh? Eh?”

We were the only two inside the elevator, and Washio gave me a bare-faced glare.

“I thought it was strange. Why would she make a request to you, an unknown high school boy playing detective?”

“Huh?”

“Listen up. From now on, don’t you meet up with Yui outside. Only when I allow you to meet her.”

I didn’t know what Washio was getting at. What exactly was going on? This man hated the idea of Ginji-san and me getting involved with Yui, so why did he become so straightforward?

The elevator stopped at the 9th level. Washio led me to a restroom around the corner of the corridor, and there were several chairs in the cramped space, arranged in 3 sides of a rectangle. On the right were lockers, and there were 3 dressing tables to the left. There was no one in the room, just a 40 inches or so TV on the room opposite me, airing a music vido. IT seemed the laughter and image visuals on the other side of the corridor were connected here, which means it was a live telecast of the studio. I endured the displeasure in my heart, and went for one of the chairs.

“Don’t you dare get out from here.”

Washio said those words, and left the room.

I had nothing to do, so I watched the monitor. There were many

young men and women seated in a fan shape, while a veteran host and a particularly eyecatching girl were seated in the middle of the first row. I was wondering where I met this girl before, before realizing it was Yui-san. She had her hair tied up, her shoulders exposed in a sporty manner, and with some suitable amount of makeup, she looked more dazzling than she did at the ramen shop. She wasn't wearing sunglasses too.

But that was not the only reason why I couldn't recognize her immediately. Yui-san on the monitor was being sexually harassed by the host, but she easily sidestepped it and directed the topic to herself, before diverting it to others again; she could smile at the harsh retorts, always giving an adorable charm. For the first time, I understood that Yui-san was a professional idol, understanding this clearly without the posters and word of mouth. To be honest, Yui-san was more interesting that the host talking.

I guessed the cut was shouted, since the actors began leave their seats. Someone probably opened the door to the studio, since I could hear buzzing and applause from the audience.

I was frozen.

I sensed that there were two sets of footsteps approaching behind me, followed by the sound of the door knob being turned.

'Listen. You get only 15 minutes."

The manager leaned in from the door, and sternly warned a certain person on the corridor. Once door, he escorted her into the room.

Yui-san, who was just on the monitor moments ago, entered the room, and upon seeing me, gave a look of relief.

"Don't let anyone else hear your conversation. Talk, and don't do anything funny."

Washio pointed at me, gave Yui-san a nudge on the back, closed the door, and went out. I couldn't understand what was going on. Why was Washio-san helping us out of a sudden?

"Narumi-kun, I'm really sorry about this!"

Yui-san stumbled into the room, and sat on the chair beside me. Our knees touched, and I jolted in shock, causing the chair to make a weird sound.

“I was busy, and Washio-san was monitoring the phone and messages, so I couldn’t contact you.”

“E-erm, so, why did he allow it today?”

“E-erm, that’s.”

Yui-san’s eyes were swimming around.

“Actually, Washio-san was suspecting if you are, erm, my boyfriend, Narumi-kun.”

“I guessed, so why—”

“So I just lied to him and said that, yes, you’re my boyfriend.”

“Ehhhhhh!?”

I could not help but exclaim madly, and Yui-san panicked, covering my mouth with both hands.

“So-sorry.”

My heart raced due to Yui-san’s soft hands, and I left the chair.

“B-but, why did you do that?”

“I told him I felt lonely not meeting my boyfriend, and looked a little broken down. I even stubbornly said that I couldn’t sing if I can’t meet my boyfriend. So I just so happened to be able to meet you.”

Stunned, I look up at the ceiling.

I see. Looking at how well it worked on this day, that really was a great idea. This could explain the change in the manager Washio’s attitude. That really was kind of bold.

Ahh, this isn’t the time to be moved. I got only 15 minutes.

However, I didn’t have the courage to move on to the main topic. First off, I handed what I received from Alice to her. Yui-san opened the layers of protective papers, and appearing there was a little owl doll.

“Wah…wahhh!”

Yui-san's eyes dazzled, and she pressed her cheeks onto the owl up. This was something she requested from Alice, and I knew the name and origin of it.

"This owl is called Minerva, right? The goddess of wisdom and courage."

"Alice-chan still remembers our promise. I'm happy. I couldn't get my side quickly enough, so I guess I'm just receiving now. Please

thank her, Narumi-kun.”

*Understood*I nodded. An awkward silence descended on us.

For we both knew what we had to talk about next,

“…I wonder, if Alice-chan isn’t the detective, and I’m the requestor, and that if we’re both friends who bond over dolls…”

Yui-san showed a faint smile as she muttered to the owl doll.

“But we’re can’t just be that though. I was the one who requested Alice for help.”

I glanced at Yui-san’s sidelong face, and realized immediately. She had already known I came to deliver bad news.

But I had to tell her,

“…I gave the ring to Ginji-san—ahh, no, Kenji-san. He wasn’t willing to take it, so I shoved the ring box into his pocket.”

Most of the efforts of a detective assistant would be devoted to delivering painful news.

“I told him about your mother, but,”

He found everything to be a hassle, and ran off, leaving his family and factory behind.

At this point, he did not want to reunite with his daughter again.

I relayed what Ginji-san said, and heard Yui-san squirm, nodding as though her neck was frozen.

“B-but…at the very least, there are two good news.”

Saying that, I peeked at Yui-san’s face. As she appeared on TV, her face had some make up on, but even though she had a smile on, there was some frostiness.

“Ginji-san won’t deny that he’s your father, and it’s not like he’s trying to hide it now.”

“I-I see.”

Yui-san again looked at the owl on her knees.

“Another good news is that Ginji-san seems to be returning to the park recently. The protests caused the work to be delayed.”

“Then.” Yui-san lifted her head, her eyes regaining life.

“If you have time, please notify me when you can go meet him at the park, if he’s there.”

Yui-san nodded.

I probably had no more opportunities to show up, since I was an outsider. I had no weight in my words, and all I could only do was to honestly convey the necessary, tragic steps for a detective to take.

“If you find that there is no further progress after meeting him, this request will be considered over. You just need to make the day payment. We won’t be collecting the success bonus.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

It was troubling that the client would thank us at such a moment. Yui-san had her hands placed on mine, which were on the table, and this left me speechless.

I took out the phone, and checked the time. It was almost 15 minutes, about time for me to leave, and if I continued to drag on, Washio-san would get impatient.

But Yui-san’s fingers continued to latch onto my backhand, not letting go.

“…Yui-san.”

“Eh? Ah, y-yes.”

“It’s about time.”

“I-I, see. Yes.”

Yui-san stood up, and placed the owl doll on the table. She was dressed in a bareback dress and a short skirt, rendering me clueless as to where to look. However, this petite body would have the stares of thousands, the cameras and the spotlights on her.

Yui-san placed her hand by the edge of the table, not moving at all. What’s the matter?

“…Yui-san, are you?”

“Wh-what is it?”

“You’re being nervous, aren’t you?”

“Y-yes. But I’m always like this. Deep breathing, deep breathing.”

Yui-san kept tiptoeing over and over again. I saw the gloomy figure on her neck, and found that what was tormenting her wasn’t tension. Why did she look so similar to Ginji-san from behind.

“When you said you aren’t feeling well, you’re for real, right?”

Yui-san stumbled back onto the chair, and turned her head slightly, giving me a feeble look.

“…Did you find out?”

“I had a feeling.”

“I guess I’m not feeling well after all.”

The slender neck turned side to side for a few seconds.

“Narumi-kun, have you taken a boat before?’

“…Eh?”

“Have you taken a boat for an entire day?’

“If it’s a ferry, then yeah.”

“After wobbling on the boat for an entire day, you’ll feel like you’re wobbling at night, right? On a night after skiing all day long, you feel like you’re always skiing in your sleep, right?”

While I did understand that feeling, why did she mention this out of a sudden?

“Right now, I have that feeling going on. After entering the entertainment industry, whenever I close my eyes, or sleep, I just feel like I was dragged elsewhere against my will.”

Yui-san rubbed her bare shoulders, muttering,

“I don’t know whether this is a good thing or not, but I don’t know

where I am, what I'm doing, whether I'm sleeping or awake. When I look at the recordings, I find a different girl there, that the one who's been kindly treated by everyone else is a girl who's similar to me in appearance and name. Where's the real me, and what am I doing?"

I stood being Yui-san, trying to think of words to console her. I felt that she was stumbling towards a dangerous cliff, unable to hear anyone's voice. I felt that my chest was being clogged.

I forced myself to exhale somewhat, and said to Yui-san,

"I."

Yui-san turned her head around, her little ear facing me. I sorted my messy thoughts into words, and continued,

"I like any aspect of you, Yui-san."

Saying that, I felt ridiculously remorseful. Yui-san stared right at me, showing a perturbed look, and immediately blushed.

"Ah, no, that's, well, I say that you look pretty on TV, but you're cute wearing the wool cap and the sunglasses though."

I kept rambling excuses, and Yui-san got increasingly reddened. She waved her hands, and said,

"Y-you can't be saying such words without thinking it through!'

"Sorry, I couldn't explain myself very well. Anyway, I hope that you don't be too stubborn, and, in other words."

At this moment, a heavy door knock could be heard.

"Yui, they're done with the settings."

Never had I been grateful for Washio-san's appearances like I did at this point. Yui-san lowered her eyes as she hammered my shoulder, and I could not see her expression.

"…Thank you, Narumi-kun."

She whispered her thanks to me, and turned around to leave the rest room.

Washio-san poked his head through the ajar door, and glared at me,

“Stay here. It’ll be troublesome if you’re spotted wandering around. I’ll be right back.”

He closed the door hard, and left me alone in the room. I could only sit on the chilly seat weakly.

The noise of the crowds, the drums and bass could be heard from the floor.

I turned around, and found there to be a different studio from the monitor before. At the bottom of the large stage were people in black. The blue lights flashed across the scene, and the spotlights crossed as the cheers echoed. Yui-san ran under the lights, showing a smile clear of any fog. Again, I realized the fact that she was a professional idol. The rhythmic bell sounds overlapped with the riffs. A snow crystal shone upon the stage. Yui-san held onto the microphone, beginning to sing as though she was exhaling.

That evening, when I walked out of the studio and head for the office, I again spotted Ginji-san at the park. As the days were short and nights were long in December, it was dark. I could see a silhouette under the dim street lamp, but upon noting the unkempt long hair and the muffler, I realized it was Ginji-san.

I parked my bicycle by a pedestrian pathway with few people, crossed the guard fence, scaled the stairs and entered the park. I unwittingly hushed my footsteps, but he noticed me immediately. Ginji-san stopped what he was doing, and his hand was holding tape. Due to the reflection, I could not determine the expression of the eyes under the glasses. He continued his work wordlessly, seemingly trying to patch up the holes caused by the air guns. In other words, he would keep the tent here for the time being, and I heaved a sigh of relief.

Next, all I had to do was to leave things to Yui-san herself, and I probably had no chances to show up again. Thus, I wordlessly nodded to Ginji-san, and walked out of the park.

I cycled slowly towards ‘Hanamaru’, and suddenly, I heard a melody from afar. I stopped, and turned to the darkness to my left.

On the other side of the railway, there was a large rectangular block of light to be seen in the middle of the buildings. I did not know when, but there was a large TV display on the wall of the building.

Shown on the screen was a snowy background, and the girl was singing the song I just heard in the studio.

NATSUKI YUI NEW ALBUM 12/24 ON SALE…

A Christmas song.

The passing train blew aside the weak singing voice.

I affirmed my white breath, kicked the asphalt, and pedalled hard again.

“It seemed you don’t know what is going on.”

Alice was seated on the bed of the office, tapping at the keyboard as she said unhappily,

“Us NEETs pride ourselves on a 100% success rate, and use that as a guarantee. I left the case to you, and this is how you end up as.”

I reported to Alice that it might be impossible to fulfil Yui-san’s request, and was lambasted to such an extent. I was forced to kneel before the bed.

“And yet you act so shamelessly in asking for payment by days. Did anyone tell you to do such a shameless thing? If you fail, of course you won’t get a single penny!”

“Ah, is that so? You said that there’s a payment by days, so I thought I would get some.”

“That’s payment on the basis of success.”

“I see…you would pay Tetsu-senpai and me by days every time, so I thought that has to be included.”

“Of course I’m paying you based on what I earn. If you really want money, I’ll splash the cash now. Experience the humiliation of daring to claim money despite your failure!”

After being told off to such an extent, all I could only do was shrivel into a ball under the chilly winds.

“Of course, there was no time limit in the request, so you should continue to try until the client tells you to stop. You decided to stop

this case without reporting to me. What were you thinking?'

"Yeah…that's right."

Upon hearing my feeble voice, Alice stopped typing, and turned towards me.

"What? You have been as limp as boiled seaweed. It looks like you have given up any hope on completing this job. Did that manager obstruct your work?'

"No, that's not it."

I see. So I looked really looked dejected after all. Even I got to realize it.

I supposed that was because I saw that cold, dazzling world, where Yui-san was about to melt like a snowflake in front of me, only to show up under the spotlights minutes later, giving an elegant smile that could be seen thousands of kilometres away. Yui-san could take it, and yet I could not despite watching from the sidelines.

I reported everything to Alice. I was called to the studio, dragged by the manager Washio to the rest room, and saw the live recording.

"Rest room?"

Alice raised an eyebrow as she drank a sip of Dr. Pepper.

"Why did the manager allow you into the rest room? Hearing your report, that man called Washio probably wouldn't want you to meet Katsuragi Kenji or Natsuki Yui. Why did he help you today?"

"Ah, that's because." It was a little difficult for me to explain, so I paused, "Yui-san said that I'm her boyfriend for some reason."

The crimson red can slipped from Alice's hand, and the drink inside was splattered onto her knees. "Hyaa!" she let out a strange noise.

"Alice, yo-you alright?"

I got up, and Alice quickly placed the can back onto the side table, before throwing the soaked blanket at me. Good thing it was just the blanket, socks and pajamas, and not the bedsheet.

"I'll get new pajamas for you."

“Y-you don’t have to do that!”

“No, but your pajamas are soaked in Dr. Pepper. Ants might crawl on you.”

“Someone like you can just agonise 3 days and 3 nights by the large ants of South America! My wet pajamas don’t matter; more importantly, wh-what did you just say, that you’re Nasuki?”

“So I said, I’m her boyfriend for the time being.” *Isn’t it more important for you to have your pajamas washed instead of this?* So I thought.

“Yo-you dare do such uncouth things on the basis of your work? You shameless scoundrel!”

Alice’s black hair was levitating as though it was powered by static electricity, and she was furious.

“I didn’t see you being determined enough to work towards your goals. I underestimated you!”

The little fists smacked the pillow a few times, ruffling up dust.

“C-calm down, Alice. I said that Yui-san made such a lie.”

Alice’s fists lost strength, and sank into the pillow, her already large eyes widened further.

“…Lie?”

“Yeah. It’s an idea she came up with to bluff her manager and continue contacting me.”

I tried to explain, and Alice showed a perplexed look, before her face became completely beetroot.

“Why didn’t you say that at first!?”

“That’s because you always kick up a fuss without listening to others!”

“U, uu.” Alice patted her knees and groaned, “It’s because your reporting method is too terrible! Next time, do it orderly! Repeat again.”

“Ah, right. But before I do that, there’s something more important

to do.”

“What?”

“You need to take a bath and wash your clothes! Your feet and pajamas are sticky now.”

Alice’s lips were quivering, and the dolls behind her collapsed like a landslide.

“Y-yo-you’re going to bathe me?”

“I didn’t say that. I’ll get Ayaka here.”

I walked out of the office, hearing Alice’s lashings behind me that were no longer Japanese. The nighd winds cooled my heated ears, and I could see lights afar. I could hear bells for some reason, and felt a pious heart.

I shall pray for the father and daughter who had to be separate from each other, hoping that they could have some moment of peace in their sleeps.

And unknowingly, December passed little by little. Yui-san was so busy, she practically forgot how to breathe, and I could only contact her by messages. She only told me that I was to contact her once I saw Ginji-san. We also had to continue sending messages as apparent lovers so that we could continue bluffing the manager Washio.

“Are you free to meet now?” Whenever I sent such a message, it was an indication that Ginji-san was at the park.

“I want to, but it’s impossible now!” Yui-san would answer in an exaggerated manner. For some reason, I felt embarrassed, and shut my phone after readin it.

However, it seemed the manager Washio understood the hidden meaning behind the messages, and called to scold me.

“Are you still thinking of ways to get Yui to meet her father? Stop right now.”

His growls stabbed at my ears, and even after pulling the phone 15cm away from my head, I could hear him.

“Don’t you understand how important this is for her now? As least think about Yui for a moment!”

“E-erm, what do you mean?”

“”

I felt that it was pointless, but I continued to play dumb.

“That homeless man is still wandering around the park. The manufacturer decided to ignore the protests and continue work. If the photos capture them while he’s being chased away, what will you do?”

“No, but I don’t think this has got to do with me.”

“You know you, don’t you? Convince him to leave right now, and explain to Yui later.”

Why do I have to be the one explaining? I thought of saying it, but I felt it was a bother, “I’ll try.” So I answered.

“…Damn it…that old geezer. Why has he been staying there all this while? Anywhere’s a good sleeping place for the homeless, right? Is it because of the money? Money?”

Washio-san muttered as he hung up the phone.

In fact, the rest of the homeless were no longer present at the park, and only Ginji-san would drop by at the park to rest from time. I met Pe-san and the others under the railway, and they too looked worried.

“We aren’t going anywhere near there because of the airgun shootings recently.”

Pe-san said, his face red from drinking,

“I got rid of my tent.” “Ginji-san’s left.” “Well.”

Conductor and Mori-san too nodded at each other with some intrigue.

“But Ginji-san’s tent is quite big, and can’t be moved away that quickly.”

“They’re going to start work soon however. What if he gets crushed

by the bulldozer?"

"In any case, there's no way this can happen."

"He'll be beaten up by the cops, right?"

"I did say to Ginji-san to head to the Central Plaza." Mori-san, "Those guys know him, and won't dispute over territory, but he just wouldn't move."

The train moved by above us, and the uncles looked up at the dark ceiling.

"We should start finding a place to pass the winter then."

"It's likely to be cold this year."

"How long does Ginji-san intend to hold out there?"

They tugged at the dirty jumpers and coats, dragged the carts and wagons, and walked towards the night streets again. I turned around, stared at my white breath, and walked to the crowd in front of the ticketing gantries.

I passe the East exit, and the frosty winds blew at me along with a familiar singing. It was Natsuki Yui's Christmas song.

I suddenly thought of what she said. What was her father—Ginji-san thinking when he promised to spend Christmas with his daughter? Did he decide to abandon his family back then? Did his wife figure it out beforehand? If that was really the case, the adolescent, innocent Yui-san was too pitiful.

Right, I did lie to Ginji-san, and he probably realized it.

I should have conveyed the two facts to him.

Your wife hated you and grumbled about you until the very end of her life.

Your daughter never hated you, and wanted to meet you again.

The second one was an idealization of mine. Yui-san kept it vague the entire time, but I guess she really missed Ginji-san. If she never missed him, why would she work so hard?

I lifted my eyes towards the dark sky, and the starry light

overpowered the bright lights on the ground.

However, I thought about how I did not actually accept this request. I was the detective assistant, and Yui-san was the client. Alice warned me time and time again that my words were a double-edged blade. It could sever and cause a person's words to form shape, and at the same time, wipe out the parts that were yet to be tangible. Thus, a detective could only be a spokesman, and not create new words.

Alice's voice, Yui-san's teary face, and the Christmas song I kept hearing continued to merge and rub at my heart. I was not sure about my next step, and I walked into the icy night.

However, that answer would forever remain an unknown.

On a certain Sunday morning in the middle of December, I was woken up by the incoming ringtone. It was dark all around, and only the LCD of the cellphone by my pillow was lit. It was Major.

"Get down to the park immediately."

Major's voice was filled with overly dire bitterness, as though a caterpillar had trekked onto an electric pole.

"…What…happened? It's so early…"

I rubbed my sleepy eyes, and checked the time. It was only 5am.

"Ginji-san is dead."

I fell from my bed.

I changed my clothes in the darkness, unable to see my limbs, put on my jumper and rushed out. The bicycle rolled down the slope, and the white breath floated from my lips to the cheeks and neck, before vanishing. The sun had just shown itself, and the streets were so dark, it felt as though they were submerged in blue ink. The weather was so frigid, I could hear my joints creaking. I felt that my consciousness was drifting 15cm away from my body, and Major's words continued to echo in my mind.

Ginji-san was dead. That Ginji-san.

I approached the building by the station, my consciousness still

groggy. There were few vehicles, sparse crowds, and only the crows were pecking at the trash bags. Once I got to the roads by the railway, I heard the sirens of the patrol cars, and I felt a shiver.

Considering this time, there were quite a few onlookers at the park. There were the homeless, hostesses who just got off work, the working class headed for the first train to work, and the employees of the convenience store nearby. I spotted Major, threw my bicycle onto the pedestrian pathway, crossed the fence, and rushed up the stairs.

“Leave, don’t come in!”

Two young policemen charged at me at the same time, and their arms were spread wide, shouting something into the communicators. The onlookers backed away—except for Major, a small fiure who was dressed in a grey trench coat and goggles, staring at the intersection between the concrete and the dirt. His lips were squirming. I got to his side, and stared at where he was looking.

There was a man collapsed on the metal floor decking sheet used for construction.

Ginji-san, I immediately thought. He was wearing the usual oil stained coat, his hands, stained in blood, were holding the ends of the muffler I was familiar with. Despite this, I could not be certain that it was him, for I could not see his face.

No—that was not the case.

I gulped, and stared at the collar of the blood-stained coat.

It was gone.

What should be a human head was empty.

Disgust, nausea, and heat that suddenly came arose from my organs to my throat.

“I told you two to leave! Get out now!”

One of the policemen pulled Major and me by the shoulders, but I couldn’t move, merely staring at the corpse from beyond the policeman’s shoulders.

There was no head. The body vanished.

The policeman's growl, what sounded like a siren, and my own nauseating heartbeat corroded my consciousness. My knees wobbled, and I was about to collapse to the floor, only for Major to grab my arms firmly. The eyes under the goggles continued to stare in the direction of the corpse.

Chapter 3

When Tetsu-senpai was in his first two years of Middle School, he had a glorious record of attending more than 30 counseling sessions. He kept fighting every day until the president of the boxing club spotted his potential. He was already a legend by the time he was 15, and the legends got more exaggerated; for example, he single-handedly sent 50 people to the emergency ward, or that he crushed an entire school year of students. It got to a point that whenever there was a gang fight involving middle school students, the police would first haul him in for questioning. All in all, the total number of times he had been taken to the police station was more than 50.

Tetsu-senpai spent such a life unbefitting of a teenager, but he got a rare lead as a result--he became good friends with the local policemen.

Once, Pole of Hirasaka-gumi told me excitedly.

"Tetsu-aniki is really strong! He's able to knock down a bicyle just by breathing at it! I heard that the stripes would look for him whenever they had trouble."

I didn't know how much exaggeration there was, but it was certain that the police, especially the investigators, seemed to owe Tetsu-senpai a favor, His links with the police had come with handy in several cases for the NEET detective agency.

But this time, the situation was different.

"...The police aren't talking. It's a murder case after all..."

On the afternoon following the incident, a weary looking Tetsu-senpai was seated on a beer crate used as a chair, patting his shoulders. There was a rich stench of tobacco smoke coming from his shirt.

"You came back from the police station?"

At the same time, Hiro showed up. Tetsu-senpai nodded, saying,

"It's tense there, and I got chased out immediately."

After that, he turned to me.

"Narumi, you saw everything, didn't you?"

I nodded silently.

The previous morning, I was the first to respond to Major's call; Tetsu-senpai and Hiro only got there after the police cordoned off the scene completely, so Major and I were the only ones who got to see the corpse."

"...Was it really Ginji-san?"

The corpse was beheaded, but the clothes and body profile were familiar to me.

"Not sure. I'll try to get them to talk."

I rubbed my roughened face with my hands, still unable to digest the reality. What's going on? Why was Ginji-san murdered? How do I explain this to Yui-san?

"What's going on with Major now? I couldn't contact him on the phone." Hiro said worriedly.

The police took Major away afterwards. Major and I hardly spoke, so I wasn't too sure as to what was going on. I guessit was because he was the first one to discover the corpse, Also, I saw a few other homeless folk being pushed into the police cars.

"They're just being taken in for questioning, right? There's no need to detain them for investigations."

"Ahh, I heard of the reason why though." Tetsu-senpai answered, "There were some metal bullets found in the corpse's hand."

"Metal bullets?" Hiro frowned.

"Right, the investigator said those were metal BB bullets."

Hiro and I both gasped in unison. BB bullets?

"There are such things around?" Hiro asked. Tetsu-senpai grimaced, shaking his head,

"Of course, there aren't those kinds of BB bullets sold in the market. Maybe they were modified from ball bearings."

"Can they be fired from an air gun?"

"I don't know either. However, I guess Major should be able to figure out whether they can be shot. He's always modifying them."

"If those are metal bullets, they can kill."

Only after he said this did Hiro realize the gravity of the situation, and he hurriedly covered his mouth.

In fact, someone was killed. This wasn't to be taken as a joke.

"And that's why Major is a suspect here."

"Looks that way."

I felt a little intimidated as to how those two were able to continue with the conversation so jovially.

"I-isn:t there a group out there shooting at the homeless? They should be the ones who did that, right?"

But despite my interruption, Tetsu-senpai didn't react much, "Maybe." saying that,

"But there's another reason. The head was severed, right?"

Hiro said with a frozen look, and I gulped down the sour saliva.

"A human head isn't something that can be chopped off that easily. According to the investigators, it appeared the neck of the corpse was hit by a powerful trauma, and the severed part was worn out. Maybe it was done by a shovel car. Anyway, human strength alone isn't enough to do that, so Major might know something, I guess."

A shovel car? There wasn't any such giant machinery in the park. The construction company wanted to build up the foundation, but they had to stop work temporarily because of the civilian protests.

Why? Who did this, and for what reason?--And also, how?

"Even Major can't figure out how to bring a shovel car around in his pockets."

"That's what I said to the police too."

"..Still yet to find the head?"

"Nope."

The conversation between Hiro and Tetsu-senpai sounded vague, as though it came from the bottom of the water. Why could they both continue talking like this? Everyone knew Ginji-san. He's not dead, right? Just the head got lobbed off. My thoughts started to be mired in mud."

Suddenly, there was something hot on my shoulder.

I turned to look up, and found that it was Tetsu-senpai. I recovered, and found that it wasn't that hot. It's just human warmth, the warmth of flesh and blood.

"Narumi, it'll be fine once you calm down."

Tetsu-senpai said tenderly with a stoic look on his face.

"Just think of the client's matters, and don't think about anything else."

I was already worn out just trying to hold my lips from quivering.

"We too found it ridiculous, since this is the first time everyone encountered such a case."

I gulped.

As a detective assistant, I encountered several cases of death. Not the medical term of death, but actual deaths.

But this was the first time I personally witnessed a corpse.

I found myself to be--unexpectedly calm.

This calmness left me more terrified than anything. I guess I was deliberately trying to get myself to puke, giving that gaudy look. When Tetsu-senpai grabbed me by the shoulder, my body chilled. To be precise, I found out that my body wasn't being hot in the first place.

I took a deep breath, and exhaled all the air vented in my throat. Once my chest relaxed slightly, I started to think of the requestor. Right, I just needed to think about Yui-san's matters. What do I do? First off, we could only wait for the reports to come in. We can't be sure that it was Ginji-san's body. Maybe someone deliberately had his shawl and clothes placed on him, and chopped the head off so

that nobody else would find out...

Who did it? And for what reason?

I buried my face in my hands; there were too many mysteries. There was nothing I could report to Yui-san, and since the matter did not appear on the news, I could only remain silent.

At this moment, I head little footsteps from between the buildings, and lifted my head.

"Yo? What happened to you? Scared out of your wits when the police detained you? Had a good night sleep at the detention cell?"

Tetsu-senpai asked,

"It's heaven compared to the camp at the foot of Mt. Fuji in the winter."

Major shrugged as he answered, and sat beside me. Like the day before, he was dressed in a trench coat and a Russian styled cap covering the ears, and the eyes under the goggles seemed to have thick black rings beneath them. Major put his hands in his pocket, and scanned us three.

"I have something to report to Alice. Come along."

It has been a while since the NEET detective agency was filled with five people. The tall Tetsu-senpai and Hiro stood at both sides of the bed, and the room looked as though it had shrunk by 10 times. I sat by the bed, and Major was at the fridge, not far away from the bedroom.

"You didn't inform the police that that was Katsuragi Kenji's body, didn't you?"

Alice glanced aside at Major when she said this, and Major replied,

"They kept pestering me about the identity of the corpse, but there aren't any documents proving Ginji-san's identity. Pe-san and the others didn't know anything,so I played dumb as well."

I looked back and forth between the duo, looking skeptical. Why did Alice and Major not affirm that it was Ginji-san's body beforehand?

Alice gave me a cold look, saying,

"Did you think that Major was just fooling around after calling you?"

"...eh?"

"Fingerprints." Said Major. "I collected them from the corpse and the camera belonging to Ginji-san, and sent the files to Alice. When I found him, there wasn't a head, and no passers-by around, so collecting fingerprints was the only thing I could do."

"You're fast. Were you discovered by the police, and detained for a day as a result?"

"Of course I was. I had chalk all over me, and even my backpack was checked through completely."

Major snorted, but I felt a chill. Major was actually able to do such a thing to a headless corpse, and even managed to carefully touch a corpse's fingerprint."

"I only got released once I used Tetsu's name."

"What's going on? Is it because you're my friend that those idiot investigator friends of mine think it isn't strange for you to do this?"

"I guess that's what it means. Thanks to your infamy, I was saved."

"I wasn't fooling around.."

Tetsu-senpai ruffled his needle-like hair. I looked back and forth between the sidelong, gloomy face of Major, and the stoic face of Alice as she continued to tap at the keyboard.

"In other words." The voice pricked at my throat, "That really was Ginji-san's corpse, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

Alice's reply echoed heavily in the dried, frigid winds of the air conditioning.

For a moment, there was silence everywhere, only countless fans spinning, their noises booming.

"Alice, what do you intend to do next?"

Hiro asked in a reluctant tone, and the black hair swayed,

"Of course, I'm going to continue investigating. We accepted the request after all."

Continue investigating? Investigate what? The man's dead, what else is there to investigate?

Alice seemed to have detected my voiceless question, for she turned her eyes towards me.

"Right now, the objective we are seeking has changed to the words of the dead, and that means it's no longer just your words. Following this, it will be like before; I will take over."

"What?"

My voice got incessantly anxious. I suppressed this emotion, and continued,

"The client requested for us to reunite her with her father, didn't she? That father's...dead now. What are you going to do right now?"

"And so what if he's dead?"

With a cold tone, Alice continued,

"We'll simply have her meet the dead."

I felt a voiceless emotion coagulate, stuck inside my ribs.

Being a detective was such a profession. They are the reviled grave diggers, unearthing the words of the dead nobody looked forward to encountering.

"...Where do we start?" Tetsu-senpai asked in a business-like tone, "Find the culprit?"

Culprit The term caused the frosty atmosphere in the office to be really stinging.

Who exactly was the culprit who murdered Ginji-san and chopped his head off? And why did he do such a thing?"

"Are we going down the line of tracking the homeless?" Hiro spoke stiffly, "Ginji-san was attacked by BB bullets, and this line is the most probable."

Alice too nodded in agreement,

"For the time being, this is the case. Tetsu, continue to coax the police into talking. Hiro, search for any witnesses on that day. I heard there are some hostesses in the busy crowds. Major, help analyze the surveillance visuals for me--"

"I'm working independently this time."

Major hissed. I was startled, and looked at his face. Tetsu-senpai and Hiro too were looking over at the little soldier standing outside the door."

"Maybe I'll be able to provide some intel."

"...And your reason?"

Alice's voice got harsher.

"I'm not saying." Major noted quietly.

Surprisingly--no, maybe I shouldn't have been surprised by this--but the detective merely nodded,while Tetsu-senpai and Hiro watched Major walk out of the office. The little body in the trench coat vanished behind the door, and I shrank back as the door closed.

"I'll be off then. I'll try my best to get the damned police to talk..."

|I better get ging too. It'll be great if there are some people I know who were there."

I watched Tetsu-senpai and Hiro head for the corridor, "Erm," and inadvertently called out to them. The duo turned their heads around in unison, looking nonchalant, and I was left stammering, not knowing what to do.

"...What's with Major's attitude? Don't you find anything strange about this?"

"We're curious too." Hiro answered, "But he's unwilling to talk, and we can't do anything about this."

"He had been like this for this particular case. He probably has something on his mind, I guess." Tetsu-senpai shrugged/

I felt a headache; this always happened. The NEETs gathered at Hanamaru were like splinters gathered together. I thought they

would be on close terms with each other, but through a magnifying glass, I could find a void bigger than an astronomical unit. No matter how many times I experienced this, I couldn't get used to this.

Tetsu-senpai and Hiro left the agency, and I squat down beside the bed.

Should I get used to this?

I lifted my eyes slightly, and saw the long black hair draped and scattered on Alice's back, shaking slightly as she continued to tap at the keyboard. Every single time, I was scolded for similar reasons, causing others to be dumbfounded for similar reasons, pitied for similar reasons. But despite this, I was hoping for Alice to say something to me.

But when Alice stopped and turned towards ne, my consciousness rippled on the surface. By the time I realized, I was already standing, meeting Alice in the eyes, and at that moment, I realized that she was hoping for me to do. With a sigh, I pulled the collar of my duffle coat.

"I get it. My job is to ask Yui-san now, right? ASk her not to remove the request, isn't it?"

Being a detective was a shackle that bounded Alice. What terrified Alice would be ignorance. The only things able to fill this void would be the requests.

|Right."

Alice looked at me weakly, and nodded. I wanted to tell her to stop, to not look at me like a drowning person grasping for straws, to command me like usual with her usual haughty tone. Ask me not to get Yui-san to remove the request? Are you kidding me? Ginji-san's already dead. How do I communicate this to her?

Ah--I got it. I just had to continue hiding this from Yui-san. Even if it appears on the news for a while, nobody knew whose body it was. Yui-san would only hear that one of the homeless died, and she just needed to think someone else died instead.

I sighed, and shook my head. I wasn't sure if I could continue bluffing her until the very end. *The reality was that Ginji-san's dead. Where's my father?* If she's going to ask me that, how should I

answer?

He's not around.

He's no longer around.

The frosty air of the air conditioning finally got through my sense of surrealism, seeping into my skin. I grabbed my shoulders, and shivered. He's dead, he was murdered. Who did this atrocity? And why?

"...Why?"

Alice muttered, and I lifted my head,

"Why was the head chopped off? Why..."

Why was the head chopped off? Is that the point you're most curious about? But it was to be expected, since Alice's the detective. If it had been a normal death, there wouldn't be a need to solve this mystery. My heavy heart sank to my gut. Why chop the head off? It's the 21st century in Japan, not the Edo period! Who knows?

But at this moment, I suddenly recalled something.

Major said that the police still couldn't identify the corpse, and there was nothing left behind to prove the identity of the corpse. How was that possible? That was strange. What about the ring I left to Ginji-san? The ring has his full name engraved on it, and is an important clue. Did Ginji-san throw it away? Or--

Was it stolen?

Again, I lifted my head, and found Alice staring at me the whole time,

"Maybe the head was chopped off--so that nobody would realize that it was him."

The petite detective shrugged a little,

"That's a possibility too, but I can't be sure of that now."

There wasn't enough information, so we couldn't be too sure about that. The detective was as cool and collected as the frosty winds. I went away from Alice's back, and head towards the corridor of the office. Right when I was about to put on my socks, Alice said,

"Narumi, there's always been something I'm apologetic to you about."

With socks in hand, I turned around. Alice was seated on the bed, covering most of her face with a large bear as she stared right at me.

Thinking about how there was something she wanted to apologize to me for at this particular moment, I could only let out a wry

smile.

"What is it? You did too many bad things that I don't know which one is it."

I joked, and Alice, hiding behind the doll, chuckled,

"I always need an excuse just to see a certain person lower his head, hear the sound of the train at dawn and touch the water by the glass windows."

"I know."

I answered, it was cold of me, I thought, and so I continued,

"Me too. I was always using you as an excuse, Alice."

I felt slightly embarrassed to continue on like this, and so I averted my eyes.

"I'm the detective assistant hired by you Alice. There aren't that many facts out there...more obvious than this now."

I left the office, and went down the tracks towards the station, and then, I stopped in my tracks at the stairs of the park, for there was something I never saw before. I initially assumed it was a flower bed, but on a closer look, I found three pots of flowers lined by each other.

The first were dried flowers placed in a normal basket, and the next were white Pansies in a plastic case with the shop name of Pachisuro. The third one was an old Japanese military helmet used as a flower pot, containing Christmas Roses.

I stood at the stairs, and stared at the flowers for a while. My feelings were as rock solid as frozen wax, trickling from my ears.

When would it be that I could be as strong as the others, I thought. Could I really hold in the pain in my heart and continue taking action to investigate the actual problem? Could I really become this strong?

Already, I could not summon my courage to open my cellphone. I wanted to create a new message for Yui-san, but I did not know how to do so. How do I go about doing this? No matter how I

would start off, it would end up hurting her in the end. Better explain everything by mail then. I can settle this without meeting her. No, what am I doing? I should be thinking about Yui-san's feelings.

And so, I could not write the message. Guess I had no choice, better do it the next day. I closed the cellphone, and intended to go on, only to hear footsteps running towards me.

"Fujishima-kun?"

I turned around, and found Ayaka. The winter uniform on her had a bright cream colored coat on her, and she was holding 4 bottles of beer under her armpits.

"Ah, these--" Ayaka noticed my stare, and said, "Min-san told me to bring them here as an offering. I heard that someone died here...someone who frequented our shop, right?"

Ayaka laid out the beer bottles by the flower pots, and clapped her palms together before praying. I looked up at the stairs, and could see the police pulling the yellow cordon tape and some figures in deep blue clothing taking action. How much did Ayaka know exactly? Even if the incident did not make the news, anyone could tell that there was a questionable death here, and it's likely that the rumors of a head being severed was spread. But so what? If there was nothing else she could do, she could only pray. I had better knowledge of this incident than Ayaka, but was this not what I could only do too?

I went next to Ayaka, lowered my head next to her, and clapped my hands together.\

However, I, who knew more than Ayaka did, was not praying towards the flowers, but towards the space I front of the stairs, towards the ground where the bloodied Ginji-san had fallen towards.

I really wanted to talk with him some more.

I wanted to ask about everything he lost, everything he rejected.

I pretended to know everything, but I knew nothing. Why did he abandon his family and child? Why did he refuse to meet his daughter? And why did he choose to live in the chilly atmosphere of the streets?

Everyone lost the opportunity to the answers of these questions.

Ginji-san was murdered, and this incident was completely different from what I experienced, since the head was chopped off from the corpse. This met that the killer undoubtedly wanted to do the job. With a shiver, I opened my eyes, and climbed the stairs. Appearing in front of my eyes was the cloudy sky, the bare ground, and the ominous yellow cordon tapes cutting through the trees.

Did I really want to know?

The outstanding police of this country would definitely unearth everything and put the culprit in prison. But did I really want to know?

"...Fujishima-kun?"

"Eh?" Ayaka called for me, and I turned towards her, who was showing an anxious look on her face.

"Are you investigating?"

Ayaka pointed at the scene.

"Nn..." I averted my eyes from Ayaka, hesitant as I replied. From the corner of my eyes, Ayaka's face got gloomier.

"It's a little inappropriate for me to say this...but isn't this dangerous?"

So Ayaka too knew that it was a murder. Trying not to let her suspect anything, I gave a little sigh.

Strangely, I was not terrified by this.Seeing a headless body seemed to have robbed all form of reality from by body over time. I guess it was probably because I did not see the severed part though. If I did see the disgusting bit, I probably would have gone crazy. However, the corpse I saw beforehand had faded in my mind, like a sculpture with no concern of life and death. That was not a corpse without its head, but one that did not have any--

I shook my head to rid myself of the useless delusions.

There was someone with a murderous intent, still on the run from the law. This was the unchanging fact.

"It's dangerous." I answered nonchalantly,

"But you'll continue to investigate, right?"

My eyes gave chase after the white breath as Ayaka spoke, and slowly nodded,

"Because we have a request."

Of course, this was a lie. Nobody asked us to investigate a murder. Was my answer not similar to what Alice would do? Fear trickled down the darkness of ignorance, and I could not move forth on my own limbs, only able to continue investigating based on a certain person's wishes.

"You're becoming more and more like Alice now."

I was seen through by Ayaka, and I covered my face with my hands.

"Eh? Eh? You aren't happy about it?" Ayaka peered at my expression from below.

"Why would I...?"

"Because you're just like Alice! Don't you really admire her?"

"A-Admire? When did you have such thoughts?"

"Didn't you become her assistant because you wanted to become more like her?"

I sighed into my hands, put them into the pockets, and looked at my own feet.

"...I can never become a detective. After being an assistant for so long, I understand this. I can't become like Alice, but it's just..."

I just wanted to be by her side, bear the burden she couldn't; that's all.

So, ahh--I see. That would be ample reason. I did not want to see her show the lonely expression of a desert at midnight. No matter how hollow the reason would be, I would always but in, digging for the truth everywhere like a dog.

Before I knew it, Ayaka narrowed her eyes and stared at my face, agreeing with me. Embarrassed, I turned my back on her, and took out my cellphone. I sent a message to Yui-san, with only one message, *I want to meet you. Are you free?*

I was about to close the cellphone, only to find Ayaka staring at my palm.

"...So, the client this time..."

"Wah!" I hurriedly stuffed my cellphone into my pocket, turning away.

"So this time, it's that person who came by our shop, that Natsuki--"

"E-erm, Ayaka, forget about that. Just pretend that you didn't see anything, and don't say anything about that."

"I won't say anything, but then, actually,"

"You know that artistes are really cautious about various things, don't you?"

"I know that, but at least be aware of Alice's feelings, Fujishima-kun."

"...Alice?"

"If she wants to, Alice can check the phone logs, Fujishima-kun. That message might look like it's an invitation for a girlfriend!" Then don't look at it. I have my rights to maintain my privacy.

"We're pretending to be lovers because her manager might be checking on us, so we're sending vague messages."

"So you'll care about the client's feelings, and not Alice's? Anyway, delete that message. I'll warn Alice not to check on your phone too."

I'll be going back to work then! Ayaka shouted, and ran back to the shop. If she's going to warn Alice, then Alice's just going to do it, right? This was the job Alice instructed me to do, so there's nothing to hide in any case...

Well, whatever.

I sat down on the stairs facing the park, and my backside felt the concrete, causing my body and my head to chill. Well, I already sent my message to Yui-san, and there's no turning back at this point. Got to sort my feelings out.

First, I had to tell her that Ginji-san died. However, I couldn't tell her that he was murdered. Looking at the body, the only conclusion

would be that he was murdered. However, the police might not have disclosed that the head was removed, so I shouldn't try to shock her too much.

And then, I had to tell her that we intended to continue with the investigations. That we wanted to discover the words of the dead, that we want to be his messenger.

But if she refused, what should I do?

In any case, it would be expected that she would reject us.

I suddenly had a thought of getting Alice to continue with the investigations alone, and then, maybe I should pay for this out of my own pockets, I guess?

However, I cupped my knees, and pondered a little, before shaking my head. If that alone would have been enough, Alice would have swung her sword around without any restraint right from the beginning, just to satisfy her own curiosity. Right now, I knew that the reason the petite detective chose to do all these was to save anyone. She had no friends, and said that she had no power to save anyone, but she was a humanist who really liked people. That's why she would always dress up in mourning clothes at the very end, leave her room, and personally face the particular people she might end up mortally wounding. This was neither out of reservations nor courtesy, but that she wanted to alleviate some of the pain by bearing it.

However, Alice was unable to interact with anyone. She did not know how to help anyone. She did not know where her battlefields were. To make up for the deficiencies, she labeled herself as 4 letters of the alphabet, and sealed herself in the office of the same name. For she did not know what other methods she could use.

And thus, this was where I come in.

Even if it was a clumsy reason, I want Alice to interact with the world.

Looking at reality, there was a huge possibility of Yui-san recalling the request. The one she hoped for us to find and bring to her had died. If she chose to give up, what do we do? Who should we continue investigating for?

Mori-san and Pe-san really admired Ginji-san, and they probably

wanted to know who murdered him. It would have been fine if we could investigate for their sakes, but they were penniless, unable to request us. One of the self-imposed rules by Alice was to be a professional detective; she would never work for nothing.

I looked up at the grey, gloomy skies, letting out white breath.

Right, there was Major too. He had been working for Ginji-san's sake, and was working alone. I didn't know what he was hiding, but he too probably wanted vengeance.

At this moment, another chill engulfed me.

At the very least, Major should know something about the culprit. He was the first to discover the corpse, and had the time to collect the fingerprints of the headless corpse, but would not explain the situation back then. Also, he had been investigating on the culprits who shot at the homeless. If the culprits were the murderers, Major should have gotten quite a fair bit of information, so why did he hide them from us. I rubbed my arms on my duffle coat, wanting to rid myself from the cold.

Thinking harder about it, I really didn't know anything about Major. Even Tetsu-senpai and Hiro knew nothing of what Major was thinking, or his past, and they never tried to. The NEETs just wanted to remain as buddies, lazing around at the back door of 'Hanamaru'

But I'm not at NEET, just a brat, someone who had meaningless pebbles and crystal balls in my drawer that I couldn't throw. Thus, I had to really ask Major what exactly he was thinking about. What did he see, what did he know, and--if there was anything we could help with.

I stood up, patted the sand off my frozen arms, taking out my cellphone as I went towards the station, but unable to think of whatever message I should send to Major.

The next day, events developed in a way I did not anticipate. Around 8 p.m. or so, the manager gave me a call,

"Where's Yui?"

I heard him shriek the moment I picked up the phone, and in my

shock, I nearly fell from the beer crate that was a makeshift chair. I was worried that Min-san or Ayaka would overhear us, so I peeked back up the kitchen through the back door of 'Hanamaru'. Luckily, they were busy dealing with the shop full of customers, and had no time to bother.

"...Di-did something happen? Yui--"

"She didn't look for you?"

"No, she didn't."

" it's the live broadcast today! Rehearsals start at 8:30! Ahh, where did she run off to? Do you really have no idea?"

"The cellphone GPS--"

"The settings were changed! When did that happen? I didn't tell her about this!"

I pressed my hand on my chest. I was the one who taught her how to do that. However, why did Yui-san run away?

"What happened? Why do you think she'll look for me?"

"Well, aren't...you are boyfriend? I thought you'll know, more or less."

"Of course, I'll go look for her, but do you know why she disappeared?" At the very least, I needed some clue."

"I guess...eh, well..."

"But what? Clarify that."

I started to get anxious. For some reason, Washio-san was acting a little strange.

"I told him the homeless man died."

The buzzing of the drunkards that were beside my ears suddenly became distant and vague from me. The sound of my gulping my saliva sounded as loud as a wok landing in a hole.

"Wh-what, what the?"

"I had no choice! The stalling of the construction at the park caused an activity to delay, and even the police dropped by once. This incident will

probably be on the news tonight. No way can it remain under wraps."

I suppressed my fury. At the very least, let her be mentally prepared!

"I told Yui that person might not be her father! That man might not be her father! Just have her think of the murdered homeless man as someone else, and forget about it."

"You said something that stupid? That he got murdered too?"

Washio-san went silent on the other end of the phone,

"I'm definitely wrong about this. I never thought that she'll disappear before the start of the show."

"I'll go look for her. Where was she before she vanished? When did she disappear?'

According to him, it was at the studio in the luxurious building I was at, and the last time she was seen was at 7.30pm or so, when the receptionist lady noticed her. I asked what attire Yui-san was in, and gave Alice a call.

"Yui-san's gone. Mind tracking her cellphone GPS?"

I seemed to hear a gasp, but Alice merely replied, "**Understood. I shall notify you.**", and hung up. I then gave Yui-san a call, but as expected, she didn't pick up the phone. How did she feel after being notified by her psychotic manager that her father just passed away? And furthermore, murdered--

Suddenly, an ominous feeling filled my entire body.

Something seemed really strange. Was it because of Washio-san? No, it's normal for him to panic when an idol under his charge vanished right before a live broadcast. However—

I didn't have the time to think of this chilling uneasiness, and hurriedly shook my head before rushing out of the back door. It took me less than two minutes to run from the ramen shop to the district park. I got up the stairs, and went around looking in the wide park surrounded by the yellow cordon tape. The policemen glared at me, but I could not see Yui-san. In any case, she was not here, so where else could she have gone to? Did she lose her mind? Because the impact of her father dying was too much—like she

climbed up to to roof of some building, or rush out onto the road—I suppressed such negative thoughts, and ran down the stairs. Maybe I shoudl visit the studio first, since she was gone for just 30 minutes or so. Perhaps she was still nearby.

I ran past the station, and was about to climb up the overhead bridge, but the cellphone in my pocket vibrated. I took it out, and found that Alice sent a message to me. Attached to the message was a map, and an arrowhead at the intersection of the central, a large red circle there. Alice then called me immediately.

“Did it reach you? Alice hurriedly said.

“I see it.” The slight despair twirled along with the saliva in my mouth.

“The GPS error from Natsuki Yui's phone is about 30m in radius or so. I marked it with a red circle.”

“So that means she's probably somewhere in the building, right?”

“That should be the case. It's up to you to look for her. I've narrowed her down to a building, so you should be able to—”

“Don't make it sound so easy.. Do you know where that place is!?” I was about to burst into tears, “That's the 'Tokyu Hands' building,!!”

I forgot when it was when Major once said,

“All the directors will choose the 'Tokyu Hands' building when there's a need to film a movie of terrorists occupying an area.”

The Tokyu Hands building is a large department store so many varieties of products, it's a whoozy. It's built on an uneven slope, and the inside of the building has skip levels based on the slopes, so the structure's a mess. There's already 3 entrances at the place, and anyone just wandering inside for a while will get lost as to which floor it is. Also, there's a lot of customers and products crammed in there, the place so messy that it won't be strange for a circus or a huge procession to pass through. How in the world was I supposed to find a girl amongst them in an hour?

I climbed up the overhead bridge, and looked down at the massive cross junction beneath me. Lots of vehicles were crammed there,

like a pulse beating. I hesitated for a moment, and fished out my phone to call Yondaime.

“What is it?”

“Are you in the office? How many people can you deploy right now?”

“12. Why?”

“I need to look for someone. At Tokyu Hands!”

I waded through the crowd on the overhead bridge, and quickly explained what happened.

“I'll be right there. Wait for me at the cross junction.”

Once Yondaime said that, he hung up. I ran to the stairs on the opposite side of the bridge, and the stench of the exhaust gases blew at me along with the chilly night breeze.

There were already intimidating looking black figures crammed at the entrance of Tokyu Hands. One of them noticed my arrival, and everyone immediately bowed to greet me in unison.

“Good work, aniki!”

“Good work!” “Good work!”

These burly men were all dressed in black long sleeved shirt, and were 12 years older than me. Their ferocious looking eyes and atmosphere would definitely terrify everyone from entering the Tokyu Hands in fear. They're the Hirasaka-gumi members, the gang led by Yondaime.

“Where's Yondaime?”

“Sou-san went to park the car.” Pole answered. Right, once we find her, we have to get her to the studio immediately!

“Erm, well, does everyone know Natsuki Yui”

“Yes!” “I got all her CDs!” “I got her photo collection!”

Unexpectedly, everyone was interested in an idol, but in this situation, it really helped me. It meant that everyone knew who to look for.

“Listen up. She should be wearing a white one-piece, a fluffy black coat, and some sunglasses. Everyone spread out. Once you find her, don't approach her. Call me immediately. Don't let her or anyone else know.”

“Right!”

“Can I have her autograph?” Did you just hear what I said?

“Are you an idiot? Of course we can't!” That's it! Rocky told them off good. “Our shirts are black, no way can the signature be seen.”

“That's not the problem here!”

“Tokyu Hands stationery shop sells pens that can be written on shirts!” “It's Tokyu Hands! They sell everything!” “Even machine guns!” “They don't sell them! Hurry up and go!”

It's awkward having the passers-by and the customers stare at me, but I did my best to command them. The Hirasaka-gumi members went out in three groups. One went to the entrance in front of me, while the other two went to the other entrances.

“You go to 1A, you go to 2A, I go to 3A.” “Right!” “Right!” The black-shirted members obeyed Pole's command and spread out, while I went down the path to the roof, looking for Yui-san. I still could not forget this possibility of a fragile heart Yui-san doing anything possible because she lost it. Oh, better get Alice to affirm her position.

Alice quickly texted me that Yui-san was still in the building, and my cellphone rang immediately.

“Aniki, we found her. Eh, which floor is this...4th? The place selling furniture and lights.”

“I'll be right there.”

A man dressed in black shirt waved at me from short staircase between 4B to 4C. It was the gang member who just notified me.

“Over there.”

He pointed at a corner of the shop selling decorative shelves and lights, and standing there was a figure I was familiar with. She was standing in the bustling forest of various Christmas trees, staring at

the lighting. I felt a huge relief, and nearly tumbled over on the chair.

“Please call Yondaime and tell him that we found her.”

I whispered to the gang member, and with bated breath, walked up the stairs, gently approaching the slender figure. There were few customers here, probably because the products were too pricey, or that it was almost closing time. Even though there was a shop attendant, he was serving another customer at the shelves area.

Despite this, as I approached the lighting corner, I stopped.

For I was dumbstruck. The lonely looking sidelong face of Yui-san mesmerized me as she stood under the red and green lights. Even with the dark colored sunglasses, I could tell snowflakes were falling from her eyes.

Yui-san had noticed me beforehand, and turned towards me, lowering her sunglasses. Her face showed surprise, reluctance and relief in order, before those emotions vanished.

“...I was found. How?”

Yui-san asked bashfully.

“I got a lot of buddies who are good at finding people.”

I deliberately hushed my voice, and answered as such.

“Really? Like that detective? You have a lot of acquaintances?”

I never thought I would be found so quickly, Yui-san said feebly. I could not look at her, and could only approach her little by little. The glass angel sculpture spun on the massive shelf, glittering.

“There has been a lot of fine lighting, and I find every one of them to be nice. But when I buy them home to decorate, I just feel lonely.”

Yui-san said as she scanned the lighting. Colorful lights sparkled on her sunglasses.

“Because...there's only me at home.”

With her fingers, she touched the pure white lighting that was shaped like a tree.

“I always wanted to live such a Christmas, that when I return home, the Christmas tree is dazzling at the entrance. Mother and I making dinner, and father returning home late with a large package of a present...”

The room was so warm, yet I felt a chill.

“But my dream can no longer be fulfilled...when I heard father passed away, I thought that my dream will never be fulfilled again. I just feel, just feel...by the time I noticed it, I found myself running out of the studio.”

With both hands, Yui-san cupped a reindeer decoration with a a shining nose, muttering,

“I know that there will be real trouble when I run out of the studio. But even though I know...”

She hugged the decoration in her clutches, and knelt down in front of the shelf.

“But I just feel that even if I'm not around, during the rehearsals and live airing, there'll be another obedient me running out to finish all my performances...”

The back draped in black tweed coat seemed as though it would crumble upon contact. I was left helpless, and could only kneel down beside her. I could not see her face as I did so behind her, and appearing in my eyes were the frame of the sunglasses and the nicely shaped ears.

“Was Washio-san angry?”

“Most likely—well, the rehearsal started. But it'll work out somehow.”

“Ah, yes.”

Yui-san smiled feebly, and put the reindeer back onto the shelf. However, she had no intention of standing out, and as she knelt down, she did not tremble.

Her father died; right before they talked, right before she decided on whether to forgive him or continue hating him. Once there was a huge hole in the human soul, once a little hit crumbled a person, the only thing one could do was to shrink back and remain silent.

Even I knew this very well.

So I said to the back in black coat.

“It's fine. You don't have to go back.”

The hair at the back of Yui-san shook slightly.

“I'm not going to watch the TV or hear any music, and I didn't come here looking for you because of Washio-san's request. Even if you fail to show up for the live broadcast, lose your chance to work in the entertainment circle, unable to release any CDs, it has nothing to do with me. Once I'm sure that you're safe, my work today is considered done. Tokyu Hands is about to close for the day, but if you want to continue Christmas shopping, I can accompany you. Do you want to have a meal once we're done? You haven't had 'Hanamaru' ramen and ice cream before, right?”

Yui-san lifted her face. Her sunglasses nearly slipped off, and I could see her large, moist eyes.

“...You're unexpectedly kind, Narumi-kun. I thought you would tie me up and drag me back to the studio.”

Yui-san said that in a half-joking manner, and rage slowly arose within me.

“I didn't say this just to be kind. It's what I really think. I don't know how your moment of stubbornness will cause trouble for others, but those are issues for Washio-san and the TV broadcasters to handle, nothing to do with me. You might think I'm stupid, but I was really worried as to whether you went to jump off a building. I've seen too much people who didn't care about their lives, and requested a whole bunch of people to look for you. I didn't look for you for your sake, or for others.”

I kept quiet, and waited for Yui-san's response. However, she merely took off her sunglasses, and stared at me. Her eyes were as dark as a starry night.

Your dad's dead, I thought. *His neck got chopped off too. Why are you able to remain so calm? Any ordinary person will cry out in sadness, or yell angrily. Just say whatever you want to say, why can't you do it? Is it because you'll ruin your makeup just because you cry?*

For no reason, I felt anger venting up within me as I silently took

Yui-san's stare. Why do people get angry at others for doing what they couldn't do? Was this too some form of self-loathing?

“...Sorry for such stupid words.”

Saying that, i looked down between my legs.

“No, thank you.”

Why thank me? Didn't you hear what I said?

“You're really a kind person after all, Narumi-kun.”

I shook my head, my forehead almost touching my knees. *Don't care about me here. It's your dad who died.*

“I-I...don't really know, what should I do...”

Yui-san's voice was sinking in icy water. *It's fine.* I thought. It was such a dire situation, and even if the bottom of the water was cold and hard to breathe in, sometimes, people could only sink.

But at this moment, a bell rang in our ears.

I lifted my face, followed by Yui-san. A familiar melody and percussions overlapped each other, followed by a singing voice.

It was Yui-san's voice.

We looked around, searching for the source of the voice. Finally, at the top of the shelf, we found the TV monitor airing an advertisement of a Christmas product. Yui-san on the monitor was seated on the railing of an ice rink, singing, looking so dazzling and transparent. I understood that it was an illusion caused by make-up, camera technology and the music, but my heart could not help but clench.

I found sense Yui-san standing up beside me, but I continued to stare at the TV monitor.

“...I should get going, I guess.”

Yui-san muttered.

“Thank you, Narumi-kun.”

I turned my head around to look at Yui-san's face once she called

me. Before she putt on her sunglasses, I seemed to have seen tear marks beside her eyes. The figure in black coat walked towards the stairs, out of the shop, and I hurriedly gave chase after Yui-san.

It'll be great if you don't make it in time, I prayed quietly.

I followed Yui-san out of Tokyu Hands, and ushered her to Yondaime's car that was waiting at the cross juncction. I continued to pray as I watched the car's taillights vanish. If Yui-san could not make it for the live performance, she would probably be scolded by the producer or a fuming artiste, and chased out of the entertainment world. This was the rule I understood. Or perhaps, in this world where a flying kiss or wink from a certain person would be worth millions, there would be a special rule to overturn this? If that was the case, the eyes under those sunglasses did not seem to belong to the residents of that world.

Yondaime drove the Maserati off, vanishing in the sea of flickering lights, and I put my hands into the pockets of my coat, walking off.

“Aniki!” “Please come to the office with us, aniki!”

Some people called me from behind.

I turned around, and found men in black shirts swarming out of the Tokyu Hands that had closed for the day. I forgot about them, and really, I wished I did.

“Good work, everyone. Thanks for your help. I should be going home now.”

Contact Alice, contact Washio-san, I had a lot to do. At this moment, the one thing I really wanted to do was to lie on the bed.

“No, Sou-san want us to calculate the pay from you this time, aniki.”

Ah, settle the bills. No matter how I remained on good terms with the Hirasaka-gumi, I could not let them work for free. Yondaime really drew a line here.

I led the hunks of the Hirasaka-gumi down the bustling night street, and at that moment, it probably was a necessity. The sharp glares from the passers-by got me to think that I should not fret the deatils. Even if I did tell them to return to the office first, they would say stuff like “We can't return and leave you behind, aniki.”

or “We'll be by your side, aniki”, and so, they followed me in single file.

“But that Natsuki Yui's really pretty. I heard Pole and the others mutter this between them.

“As to be expected of you, aniki.” “Are you aiming for the entertainment world next...?” “Aniki's really popular, able to make any beauty pregnant within two seconds of looking at them.”

“This has nothing to do with popularity! Anyone who can do that is a demon, okay?”

I could not help but turn around to retort.

It was an hour later when Yondaime returned to the office. During this hour, I was teaching the Hirasaka-gumi members on basic sums. No matter how I explained to them, they couldn’t understand how to write a request bill, so I asked them if they knew how to do basic sums. Pole said “I don’t know how to do sums at all.”, while Rocky gleefully answered “I know how to do addition of points”, and someone else pointed out “Then what about subtraction?” Those words left the 12 black-shirted men, intimidating enough to shut up a crying kid, grimace in agony.

“Aniki, why do you need to reverse the numerator and denominator?”

“erm, well…”

“If you reverse it, you can easily change the numerator and the denominator over!”

“You’re good!” “6 became 9!” “Amazing!” “Won’t our salary increase then?” “6000 Yen became 0009 Yen!” “Isn’t that a decrease, you idiot!?”

I had enough. I want to go home. Right when I began to start packing up, Yondaime, dressed in a large red Chinese jacket, opened the metal door, and walked in. At that moment, the office went down to below freezing point. The ice cold young gang leader glanced at the stupid sight of several of his subordinates at the sofas behind the table, and wordlessly kicked at it.

“Wooah.” “Wah!”

Pole and Rocky collapsed onto the floor, letting out loud thuds.

“No time for you guys to play. Gardening boy, come here, I got something to say to you.”

Yondaime led me to the door to the left of the table, the room that was a storeroom and the place for sleeping in. The room was filled with bookshelves, and unopened boxes, the place was so crammed it was hard to breathe in. There were a simple bed by the wall deep inside, and the little table beside it had a computer with some dust on it. Yondaime sat on a chair, while I sat on the bed.

“How’s Yui-san? Made it in time?”

Yondaime shrugged, and opened the cellphone. He showed me the TV programme that was airing. There was the word ‘live’ shown at the bottom right of the screen, and I could see the camera move around the scene along with the introduction of the emcee. The camera scanned the audience filled with young men and women, and finally stopped at the stage. Waving at everyone under the many spotlights was definitely Yui-san.

I bit my lips, and averted my eyes. Like before, Yui-san was standing in the rectangular dazzling world, giving a smile that did not comprehend any tears. Just an hour ago, she was knelt before me, almost crushed by anguish.

Yondaime closed his phone.

“Tetsu already briefed me on the killing of a homeless.”

Killing of a homeless., the term left my entire body frozen. This guy never beat around the bush when talking.

“Alice hasn’t given us the command. What do we do?’

“Just…like before.”

Slowly, I stammered as I explained. There was no reason to continue investigating, but I wanted to find an excuse to continue helping Yui-san.

“Still the same old idiot, huh.”

Recently, I found that the word ‘idiot’ Yondaime would use recently

had a certain gentleness to it, so I nodded.

“What do you want to do?”

I did not know how to answer, and I clenched my fists hard on my knees. I already made up my mind, yet I had no self-confidence. It was all because I just saw Yui-san on that screen. Should I really go save her? *I don’t know where I am, what I should do*—She said several times before. I always thought that the knit cap and sunglasses covering the pretty face of Yui-san as she tried so desperately to wipe her tears was the real her. Maybe the Natsuki Yui shown on the TV however might be the real her, and that Katsuragi Yuina was just a shadow of her. If that was the case, I guess all the efforts I put in was for not. Better not get involved with her; I should just forget about her.

No, I weakly clenched my fists.

The world I interacted with was small and limited. Thus, I could not do anything other than to set a destination, close my eyes, and head out. Even if I did do this, I might end up hurting the client or my friends.

But did I not do this several times already?

When I lifted my head, Yondaime, who got impatient form waiting, spoke up, and our voices overlapped,

“About Major.” “Listen, Major.”

We kept quiet at the same time. With a bitter grimace, Yondaime averted his eyes.

“…What, did you know already? Why are you pretending to give that confused look.”

“I’m not pretending. I’m really confused.”

However, that was only all I could do. Could I only go to check on what exactly Major knew? And what was he hiding?

“Do you know what’s the worst possible situation now?”

“Eh? I do! I’m guessing that the worst would be that Major won’t trust me again. I’ll just bear that sin though.”

“That’s not what I’m getting at.” Yondaime gave a frustrated look,

and ruffled his hair, “He’s a suspect.”

Shocked, I stared at Yondaime’s face.

“…No, I already knew that the police is suspecting him.”

“You don’t understand where the problem lies here. I don’t care what the police is thinking. Tetsu and Hiro are doubting Major, and so am I. He’s the first one to discover the corpse, is a military nerd, familiar with airguns, and should know how to chop a head off. How can we not suspect him?”

I was speechless, and my mind kept repeating Yondaime’s words.

“Are you—serious?”

My throat felt pain from the increasing dryness.

“Why, why would Major want to kill Ginji-san? Ginji-san really likes Major, they’re on good terms, and Major isn’t the type of person to do this. Everyone is friends, so why couldn’t trust each other?”

Yondaime’s icy galre caused me to shut up, and I understood what stupid words I just said. I sighed, and sat back onto the bed again.

“Based on your definition, I do not trust Major.” Yondaime asked, “But we don’t completely understand major as a person, so why can you say that he didn’t kill?”

I shook my head, but I did not understand what I was trying to deny.

What Yondaime said was right. I understood this really well. Tetsu-senpai, Hiro, and even Alice were doubting Major. It’s like back when we investigated on Tetsu-senpai’s past; nobody said that ‘Tetsu won’t do such a thing’. Trusting others and trusting their innocence were two different cases.

If Major’s impulsive actions were based on selfish immaturity and simple trust, no matter how many crimes he made, the NEETs should have a strong trust that he would not be abandoned.

But I couldn’t do it. I could not make such a clear distinction.

“if it’s me, I’ll beat Major up.” Yondaime said.

He said the same thing during the situation about Tetsu-senpai. Maybe he was just joking, but I could not laugh. Once I calmed down somewhat, I spoke up.

“I have been thinking.”

“Thinking about what?”

“You’re smart, and strong, Yondaime. If you’re Alice’s assistant, I guess all the cases can be solved in 3 days.”

“You got to be kidding.” Yondaime scowled. “Who else can serve such a troublesome person except for you?”

Even I couldn’t do it that well.

“You’re different from me, and different from Alice and the other NEETs in the first place. You can barge into other people’s inner hearts without any care, and we need someone crazy.”

I lowered my eyes, and sighed. I was this kind of character anyway.

At this moment, Yondaime narrowed his eyes, and stared at me, saying,

“If a stray cat slips in through the gap in your window, will you get angry and tell it off to not come in with dirty feet?”

“Eh…?”

“That’s the kind of feeling you give. I can’t get angry at you even if I want to.”

I blinked, and lowered my eyes, before lifting them again to look at Yondaime’s face.

“You’re like a poet today.”

“Shut up, you bastard.”

Yondaime gave a ferocious look. Recently, I figured out that whenever he shout the word ‘bastard’, it really indicated that he was angry.

The surroundings was filled with darkness as I walked out of the

Hirasaka-gumi office, and the weather got colder. The narrow alley was divided from the outside road, and few people went by this place. Down the steep slope, there were a few flickering street lamps. Under one of the lights that were about to be extinguished, I took out my cellphone, and decided to call Major before I changed my mind.

However, the word 'suspect' by Yondaime again lingered in my ears, and I could not open it.

I'll call tomorrow. It's late already.

Right when I was about to slip the cellphone back into the pocket, the cellphone suddenly rang in my palm.

"I have something to request from you, Vice-Admiral Fujishima.

Major said on the phone, and I leaned my back on the icy wall, unable to let out a breath.

"You may think it's a little strange from me, but mind listening?"

I never expected Major to actually take the initiative, and all I could only do was to look up at the night sky devoid of stars, saying, "right, anything I can help with?"

After some silence, Major started to explain. It really was a strange request.

I had not shown up at the student council office for a while, and the student council office was more empty than a beachside in late Autumn. There were crumpled posters and pamphlets on the desks, two printers whose rollers were spewing out papers, and the boxes lined side by side contained promotional bulletins for the stalls and stage performances.

There was a petite, bespectacled girl at the desk, carefully compiling the documents and putting the rubbish into a plastic bag like a squirrel preparing for the winter.

"Fujishima-kun!"

She noticed me enter the office, and lifted her head to call out to me. This girl's called Kousaka Yukari, the inspection committee chairperson of our school's student council.

"Sorry to ask you for such a strange favour." I bowed to apologize.

"It's really a strange favour. I was shocked."

Now that she mentioned it, all I could feel was trepidation.

"Do you mind telling me the truth? Does it have something to do with that detective?'

"That's how it is. Sorry."

Atually, it was not that I chose not to say it, but that I really did not know. Major would not explain, and merely requested me.

"Do you know R High School? It's a private boys High School near the M High School you study at. Think the students can visit at certain times. You know the people in the student council, don't you? Ask them if we can visit R high school."

I merely relayed Major's request to Kousaka-senpai, and I thought it could not be done. The next day, when Kousaka-senpai said that it was already done, I was shocked.

"We've known the student council of R High School for a while, and recently, we just had a change, so I thought we should go visit. Your request just so happened to be at the right moment.

"Eh? Change?"

Once I mentioned it, Kousaka-senpai immediately jumped up.

"Didn't you know? Our school just had a student council voting last month. Our student council has a change of personnel every year after the culture festival, and we've retired."

"I didn't know…"

The school had a student council voting? I didn't really remember much about the culture festival, so naturally, I didn't know an election was held. I didn't know whether I voted, so I guess I skipped classes on that day. Last month, I was quite busy due to Min-san's engagement.

“What’s this about retirement?”

“We’re already in our 3rd years. We need to prepare for the Test.”

“Ahh, I see.”

I almost forgot how a high school student should be living their lives.

“Then why are you cleaning up the student council office?”

“The new members and committee don’t seem to be able to clean up, and the office has been messy for a while, and the 3rd years have fewer lessons…right, don’t you have 6th period lessons?”

“Eh? No, it’s so happened to be self-study.” I barely managed up a lie; of course, it was obvious that it was a lie.

“You skipped classes anyway, right?” Suddenly, a voice rang behind me, causing me to jolt up in shock. I turned around, and found a long haired girl standing at the door of the office, with a hairclip, and a sharp glare. She’s the student council president, Hayano Kaoruko-san. No, I should say she’s the ex-student council president.

“Listen up, you’re representing us to R high school, so don’t do anything unruly. Right, go visit the teachers at the office to greet them, and then, greet the new student council president of R high school and the culture committee members. This is our report for the culture festival and sports festival, so remember to exchange it with them. This camera belongs to the student council…”

Kaoruko-senpai tasked me with several frivolous stuff, and stuffed lots of stuff into my bag.

“Kaoruko was the one who helped with the procedure this time.” Kousaka-senpai whispered at my ear. I see. I could not bring myself to lift my head at senpai.

“You couldn’t tell us the reason anyway, right?”

Kaoruko-senpai folded her arms as she said this.

“Yes, sorry…”

“…Is it about the incident that happened at the park in front of the station?”

I was shocked, but did my best not to show it on my face. Kaoruko-senpai was exceptionally sharp at strange aspects. The murder incident of a homeless at the park was already reported on the news —except for the strange state of the corpse. I might have been seen hanging out with the homeless by the other students, and the smart ones might have noticed.

“Try working a little harder and do some things a high school student should be doing, you know?”

Kaoruko-senpai sighed as she said, obviously because she had enough. Kousaka-senpai did not seem to understand what Kaoruko-senpai was saying, and turned back and forth between her and this intimidated me.

“Can this guy really represent us M high school?” Kaoruko-senpai asked Kousaka-senpai.

“Fujishima-kun is fine! He’s in charge of taking over from me, so he should get used to dealing with outside work.”

“…Take over from you, senpai?”

“Eh? Didn’t I tell you? You’re chosen as a inspection committee member.”

“Ehhhhhhhhhh?”

This was the first time I heard that. No, I think senpai mentioned it before summer break, but I never thought she would be serious.

Right—our M High School has a very troublesome school rule, that the students had to join a club, and because I never participated in any club activities, it was breaking the rules. I thought nobody bothered me because they never pursued the matter, but it was because I became an inspection committee member. I heard that by participating in student council activities, I didn’t need to participate in club activities.

‘The new committee leader may be looking for you, so do your best!”

Shocked, I walked out of the school in a daze. I was more stunned to see Major’s attire when I found him waiting outside the door.

“What happen? You look like your head got blasted by a 84mm Carl

Gustav.”

“If I really had my head blown apart, how would I have a face? And that’s not the important point!”

The dark blue blazer was matched with grey pants, loosened tie, and a shirt that was not tucked in. It was clearly our school’s boys uniform.

“Why are you dressed like this?”

“You can buy this thing on the internet.”

So anyone could buy it…

“They have sizes for an elementary school kid?”

“Enough jokes. Time to get down to business.”

Major pointed his chin at the station, and walked on.

R High School was located about 2 subway stations away from our school, a Boys High School located in a quiet residential area. It’s one of the rare few schools in Tokyo with a high rate of those that advance to college, and even I, who transferred schools, and was unfamiliar with the high schools in Tokyo, heard of it. When the school grounds facing the trees by the pedestrian pathway entered my eyes, I was already overwhelmed by its majesty. For some reason, the school had glass walls, and 8 tennis courts, and the large school grounds probably could allow the baseball club, soccer club, handball club, volleyball club and track and field club to practice without any arguments. I really had to wonder if this place was really Tokyo.

“What are you scared of? If you’re a representative of the student council, act like one.”

Major patted me on the back as I stood still in front of the gates, but it was impossible not to be scared. Once I entered, the massive, gradual slope reached the second level of the school, and there were sculptures and flag poles by the sides. It looked like an art museum, or a foreign embassy. Also, it just so happened to be after school, and there were many students around.

Major nudged me to the guard house by the right. I showed my student handbook, and finished the guest registration. Major quickly shuffled into the school, and in a very familiar manner, took out the guest slippers from the shoe locker.

“The staff office is on the west side of the second floor.”

I let Major wait for me as I entered the offices to greet the teacher in charge of the student council. Once I got out, Major leisurely walked out from the staff toilet.

“Next, to the student council office. It’s on the second floor of the middle block.”

“Why are you so familiar with this place?”

“Of course it’s because this is my alma mater.”

Shocked, I stood on the corridor, and the few R high school students passing us by stared at us.

“…This is your alma mater? Th-then why didn’t you just go in yourself?”

“Shh, quiet.”

Major dragged me to the stairs were few people were at, and explained the reason.

“It’s a little awkward for me to say this, but anyone, I’m not someone who should be in this high school.”

“Huh?”

“Back when I was a student, I left a lot of rumors as Mukai Hitoshi. For example, I added flares to the bonfire during the culture festival, used the tables and chairs at school to create mobile suits, took photos of the P.E. teachers drinking hard in the staff room and spreading them out, and so on.”

“So to sum it up, the teaching staff really remembered you well…”

“Right. When I graduated, the past teachers-in-charge and the club advisor finally got together and celebrated with tears.” I guess they’re happy that the problematic student graduated. “That’s why I can’t show up in my past uniform and sneak into school. Just my back alone might cause people to notice me.”

So do you think you can slip past them wearing a different school uniform? With that unique body shape of yours, you'll be discovered soon enough.

"But illegally sneaking in is already something really easy for you."

Once I said that, Major shrugged,

"I can do it when it's in the night, but it's too bad that I need to do this during club activities."

"Club activities?"

"This time, my mission is to enter when those guys are gathered in the clubhouse, so that's why I need your help, Vice-Admiral. I'm grateful for your help, and you can go home once you're done with the student council matters. What are you going to do next?"

"You're still asking this now?"

At this point, I could not bring myself to get angry."

"When you're not telling me anything, of course I'll go along!"

"I knew it." Major showed a forlorn smile.

Who are these guys he referred to? Looking at the faint smile on Major's face, I doubt he would tell me even if I asked him now.

The student council president of R High School was a shoddy looking boy with dyed hair, earrings, and a bright red T-shirt under his open uniform. Shockingly, he's only a first year. Throughout this time, he was going "Ahh, too bad Kaoruko-senpai is about to graduated. I had my eyes on her during the culture festival, but looks like she's going to a girls college." I had assumed the president would be some aloof, elite bespectacled boy, and thus, I was shocked. But thinking about it again, this was Major's alma mater. The school might be filled with students wasting away their intelligence.

Once I was done with business, we went to the clubroom building. I saw that their clubroom building was a majestic 3 level building like their school compound, and when I recalled how the little clubs in M High School were bullied, I could not help but shed some tears. The 3rd floor was filled with culture clubs, and Major went to the room at the corner.

There were all kinds of stickers on the door of that room, ranging from a golden eagle of the American army, the lion and crown crest of the English army, the Swastika of Nazi Germany and the flag of the sun, to a warning label of dangerous items and radioactive stuff, to stickers of helicopters, fighter jets or missiles, and even a sticker with some mantra or a heart sutra. Amidst the messy stickers, there was a little white doorplate with the words 'History Research Club'.

History Research Club? Leaving aside the name of the club, it was obviously—

Major indicated for me to remain silent, and quiet his footsteps as he approached the door. There seemed to be people inside, not just one. I scanned the corridor, making sure that there were no passers-by, and held my breath to concentrate and eavesdrop on the conversation inside.

"…Stop it. I really don't want to do this." "I never thought…it would really end up like that." "Did you see the news?" "The police…" "It's…fault!" "No…fault!" "…anyway…" "I don't want to." "…In that case." "Don't joke around."

Were they arguing? Police? News? What were they talking about? Why did Major come all the way here?

At this moment, Major knelt before the door, gently inserted a crooked piece of handle into the knob, and spent only 10 seconds or so to open the door.

Major got up, and opened the door.

There was the sound of chairs colliding, frantic footsteps, magazines being torn up, and even muffled voices stick in the throats from the room.

"Such poor security from you. Didn't I say this is an armory, that you need triple locks?"

Major said as he scanned the clubroom.

Looking at the devastation in the room, I could imagine how messy the clubroom was. The shelves were crammed with magazines and mangas, while the TVs had many game consoles gathered around them, the CDs and DVDs could be seen being left everywhere, and there were all kinds of weapons, either model guns or air guns by the wall, hanging under the ceiling, or stuffed into cardboard boxes.

There was also the stench of cigarette linger. In this chaos, there were some chairs. 3 of the 4 students in uniform were seated on the chairs, and the last one was surrounded by the trio, collapsed on the floor.

“Mukai-senpai?”

Two, three of them asked with shrill voices. Major kicked aside the rubbish on the floor, and I could even sense his killing intent from behind him.

“Why are you looking so lazy? Have you forgotten the basics of managing your guns? Don’t eat in places with guns and bullets, and no smoking.”

“Senpai, why did you come today—what’s with your uniform?”

The boy standing at the frontmost, taller than Major by two heads asked. His messy hair covered half of his spectacles, the eyes under the shadows giving an unhealthy glint.

“I wanted to say that I want to retrain your morals and patriotism, but there’s no time for this today. Anyway, what is Private Hirabayashi doing?”

Major asked as he pointed at the youngest looking boy. The boy at the deepest corner of the room was buried in trash, collapsed on the floor.

“Nothing!” “I just got a little angry, and wanted to teach him a lesson.”

The boys standing at the front seemed to be the seniors, and impatiently answered Major’s question. The boy called Hirabayashi awkwardly got to his feet, and patted off the dust on his arms and knees. If all of Major’s self-confidence was stripped away, I guess this boy would resemble him. Hirabayshi’s a diminutive, baby-faced boy who looked really weak.

“…Senpai, erm.”

Hirabayashi wanted to say something, but someone beside him gave him a whack.”

“Enough with the unnecessary stuff..”

“Mukai-senpai, I don’t know why you came here today, but your sudden appearance will cause us trouble.”

Near to Major was a tall boy. He glanced aside at me, and then at the uniforms we were wearing, giving a troubled look.

“Which school uniform is this? They’re watching every outsider closely, whether they are alumni or not. It’ll be troublesome if the teachers find out. Please leave.”

“Answer my question, and I’ll leave. How many of you in the club now? Not just the 4 of you, right? What about the chairman?”

“There’s 8 of us altogether. The third year seniors didn’t come by as they’re busy preparing for exams.”

“Is there anybody from outside school who join in on the mock battles?”

“…Eh, sometimes, yes.”

“Where are your main fields?”

“The place in Saitama you recommended us, Mukai-senpai, and my dad’s building.”

“You also did some illegal survival games on the streets, didn’t you? Stop fooling around with me. If you played in those fields, you wouldn’t need these tools to unlock.”

Major kicked at a black leather pouch that was rolling on the floor, and wires and pliers rolled out from the opened bag. The boy near Major turned beetroot.

“So what, this has nothing to do with you, right, senpai? Please don’t bother with that too much.”

“Late at night, December 16th, you had another mock battle, didn’t you?”

I was quietly startled.

December 16th, the day Ginji-san was murdered.

“I don’t remember much. Recently, we’ll just go out to play as long as we have numbers, and we didn’t really specify any dates. I guess

we played like 3, 4 times a week?”

The boys tried to act calm, but I did not miss out on the members glancing at each other, giving signals the moment Major stated that date. I felt a chill up my spine; did Major get some evidence? Did he come to R High School for this reason? Did these people really—

Did these people really kill Ginji-san?

So Major posed as a student of M High School, and visited them during club activites, all for the sake of uncovering the plot these guys have?

“Let me have a look at the latest bullets you guys are using.”

I stood behind Major, and thus, was unable to see his face. However, the boys who were 20cm taller than him looked really terrified as they shrugged took out the bullets from the paper-wrapped bags on the shelves or in the plastic bags. I guess he really was giving a terrifying look.

Major glanced at the 5 types of BB bullets, and asked them,

“Are these really all you used?”

The club members nodded unnaturally a few times. Major snorted, and walked deep into the classroom. I spotted some things that was inserted along with the umbrellas, and inadvertently held my breath.

Japanese swords.

Major took them out one by one, unsheathed them, and checked the blades. Those were fake. Everyone knew that, but upon seeing the blades reflect the ceiling lights, nobody in the room could move. Major checked them again, put the swords back into the shelves, and turned around to check the shelves. Amongst the many magazines introducing survival games and air guns catalogues, there were a few terrifying books regarding swords and the murder methods the USSR special forces employed.

Major scanned the members, and asked,

“You didn't put any real swords, did you?”

“...There's no way we'll have them.”

Once he heard the reply, Major turned around.

“Vice-Admiral, we're done here. Let's go.”

I signed out at the school gate, and Major immediately removed his clothes, scaring both the guards and me. Under the shirt and pants were the usual camouflage army jacket Major would wear. Once he was done, Major rolled the uniform up, stuffed it into a trash bin, and stormed out of the school gate. I had never seen Major so angry before.

On the way back, Major remained silent as he sat on the train. I held the onto the straphanger, unable to say anything. I had so many questions, my head was about to burst, yet I was unable to convert them into words. I was yet to be mentally prepared on how to hurt Major, and where.

Major is a suspect. My mind again recalled the words from Yondaime.

I had a premonition that the truth would be more shocking than I thought. My mind kept switching perspective, recalling the history research clubroom filled with killing toys, and the expressionless boy.

We got off, and passed through the crowd towrds the East gate. At this moment, the short day of Winter had vanished to the opposite side of the station building, the streets covered with long cold shadows. The colorful lights were like fake stars, flickering sharply above our eyes. I seemed to hear Yui-san's Christmas song from somehwere. It's a topseller now.

We passed by the bottom of the overhead bridge, and Major muttered,

“They're my juniors.”

I walked silently beside him.

“I taught them everything from guns to wars to army, and they're wonderful subordinates. 2 years after I graduated, I still continued to check on them, and whenever I return, the club would have new members.”

I looked forward, and nodded. The passers-by on the road by the railway were fewer in numbers. At the tall place, I could see large black shadows, shadows that surrounded the forest in the park. The few street lights taller than the trees were dark, and one could sense that life was gone from them.

“So, their wrongdoing is my responsbility as a commander.”

Major stopped at the short staircase leading to the park, and turned around to face me, holding some little things in his hand.

Little beads contained in a plastic bag. Were they bearings?

I lifted my eyes to look at Major. I guess this was the first time I saw his face up close without his visor or goggles. It was a baby face that had forgotten what aging was.

“When I found Ginji-san's corpse, I took the fingerprints and these things from the marks on his palm.”

I exhaled the stiff air inside it, the breath filled with the taste of metal.

“Ginji-san had bullet marks on his hands, probably because he was trying to protect his face. The metal bearings can be fired from toy guns in the shop, but the power and precision isn't that strong. This indicates that they illegally imported guns, and the sources of such guns are few in numbers. Also, every time they attack the homeless, the guns will improve as they continue.

Major's knowledge of the related realm was not to be underestimated. Given the clue that there was progressive improvements in the guys—

One could be certain which people bought which guns.

“I went there today to be sure of this. Thanks for your help.”

“Then—”

It's those brats from the history research club? Those high school kids killed Ginji-san?

“I'm not too sure.” Major answered. “You can deal with that evidence however you want, but you do not do anything to the R High School history research club. The wrongdoings of the squad is

something the leader has to deal with."

Major turned around, and walked off towards the dark street. The wavy street lights continued to shin on his back, until the camouflage pattent became a little stain in the darkness, vanishing before my eyes.

I put my hand on the railing, the other hand gently holding the plastic bag containing the bullets. Major had been saying everything the entire time, and I could not refute. He came to raid my base, and I could not squeeze the trigger.

Chapter 4

The next day, Yui-san gave me a call.

“Sorry for causing you trouble recently, I suppose?”

Yui-san’s cheerful voice seemed bubbly, but in turn, that made me uneasy. At that moment, I was standing in front of the student council office, reading a report on R High School, and to avoid their eyes, I ran to the corridor to pick up the phone.

“Are you alright?’

I put my elbow on the handrail, asking this. Under the cloudy sky, there were still a few leaves on the ichiyou trees in the atrium.

“I’m fine, more or less. I went around apologizing, and most importantly, to Washio-san! Ahaha.”

Her cheerfulness in turn left me with a chill.

“And also, sorry. I should be apologizing to you directly instead of calling you.”

I knew what Yui-san wanted to say next, and tried my best to think of how to cut her off. However, everything I did was futile.

“You knew, didn’t you? My father…is no longer around. Thank you for everything till this point. You can simply message me the investigation fee.”

“Wait a moment.”

I said without thinking,

“If you cancel the request now, we’ll be bothered too. Right now, Alice—”

My voice trailed off into the void on the other side of the handrail, as I seemingly heard Yui-san’s perturbed sigh.

“What…are you saying?” Yui-san said. **“Isn’t he already dead? My dad had his head chopped off by someone! What are you saying now, really? Hey, he’s still unidentified, right? I say I want to go to the police station, but Washio-san and the**

chairman begged me not to."

"…Sorry."

"What are you apologizing for, Narumi-kun? You didn't do anything bad, you know? I don't have anything to request from you, so, so…"

Yui-san's voice abruptly wilted due to a loss of heat, as though ripped apart by the Northern Winds. I could hardly hear the last few words from her before she cut the line.

Hey, Yui-san, don't you want to know? I asked the quiet phone. *Don't you want to know who chopped your dad's head off, and for what reason? Don't you want to curse at the culprit? Don't you think they should pay for their crimes? Don't you want revenge?*

It was a pitiful rhetoric. I had no energy to answer.

I closed my cellphone, slipped it into the pocket, grabbed the handrail with both hands, and squat down. I understood that there was nothing I could help with, but we continued to investigate. Like an amputee who hallucinate pain from the limbs that weren't there, I scratched away emptily at the lost arms.

The NEET detective agency was located in a 5-storey tall building, there were 6 surveillance cameras set up all around it, so there would be visual recordings of the surroundings. This time, they came into use in an unexpected manner; the 6th camera set at the roof took a visual of the road right before the public park.

"It's still too far though. No matter how much I try to enlarge the visual, the passers-by are just bean size. I can tell how many there are, but not their genders."

Alice shrugged as she sat on the bed.

"Well, that's a huge progress."

Typically, we would ask the experts in college to clean the image for us through Major's connections. However, Major obviously wanted to take action alone, so we spent a lot of time trying to get others to do so. The 8 hour video was finally cleaned and sent to us today. Alice and I hurriedly checked on them.

As Alice had mentioned, the video showed us some little bits of intel. Despite this, we got something important. The park couldn't be seen as it was covered in the thick forest, but the road in front of the park was clear to see. The other side of it was the railway, so anyone entering and exiting the park would certainly be caught on camera.

"December 16th, the last one to enter the park was—"

Alice tapped at the keyboard, rewinding the video.

"This man, at 10pm or so."

The shadow, the size of a little finger, climbed up the stairs."

"This one's Ginji-san, I guess."

"Logically, that should be the case. The next one was at 4.40am, the next morning."

Alice opened the search column at the bottom of the screen. The visual got a little brighter, and there was a little black dot on the other stairs close to the station.

I checked my call log; Major called me at 5am, on the morning of 17th December. Ginji-san died, he said. If that was the case, the black shadow should be the first one to find him, Major. 10 minutes later, other people entered the park, probably the other homeless.

"This is you, right?"

Around 5.30 or so, there was a figure in the video who parked his bicycle by the roadside, and ran up the stairs.

"I guess. I don't remember seeing any other bicycles there."

At that moment, the sky started to brighten, the patrol cars arrived at the scene, and the park was filled with onlookers. I personally witnessed what happened next. Alice stopped the video.

"The mystery is now an actual fact."

I nodded.

Typically, the park would be empty at night, and even during the period of the reconstruction being stalled, there were fences around the entrances. Nobody entered over the past few days, and the only

exception was Ginji-san, the last resident there.

On the night of that incident, nobody, other than Ginji-san, entered the park from the moment he returned till the next day, when Major found the corpse. Then who was it who chopped Ginji-san's head off, and for what reason? I couldn't determine any traces of any tools used to chop a head off being lead into the park.

"How was it done? And why?"

Alice muttered.

I opened my mouth, *hey, Alice, you can't bring yourself to stop, right? Yui-san called me the previous day, and told us clearly to stop the investigation. No matter how hard you try to unravel the mystery, everything is useless Just stop it.*

But I couldn't bring myself to say anything, and never told Alice this. While I was at a loss of words, Alice stood on the bedsheet.

"It's only 8pm now, still too early. Narumi, your sister must be worried about you, so you can go back now. Come here at 2.30am."

I lifted my eyes at the detective and blinked,

"2.30?...no, I'm fine with that, but why?"

"There are times when I feel like doing some things an ordinary detective would do."

Modern medicine still refuses to admit the term 'agoraphobia', but Alice claimed herself to have such a term. She didn't believe it to be a flaw, as she hated going out, and would merely spend days cooped up in the office. It was a choice in life, like a short person not joining the basketball club or someone with short hair not tying a ponytail.

In any case, this probably wasn't a disease. The reason why I felt this way was because, though there was no other way, Alice had been going out recently.

"Yes, but God wrote in that page of my notebook that the sun, moon and stars hate me." So Alice said, "I don't mind though. If I

really have to go out. I'll just curse at all the lights in the world before opening the door. The scene of the crime is nearby, so I'll force myself out."

Alice sounded haughty, but she wouldn't go out without grabbing onto the hem of my duffle coat. The dim road lights shone upon us, and the uneven shadows of the two of us reached deep into the darkness of the park. Alice wore a thick gown over her usual pajamas, and the strange combination left me unable to explain. More than that however, just walking into the park was already a bad thing, and it was pointless for me to care.

Thinking about it, this was the first time I actually went for a search ever since I became Alice's assistant. The police continued to forbid everyone from entering the police, and we chose to visit late at night to hide from time. The last train ride was gone, and there was silence in the stretch near the park. The park was filled with the aura of death, as though within reach. The reconstruction work had stalled the entire time, and thus, the place had areas covered by metal sheets, ground that was dug up, and dried grass. It looked like some tragic piece of puzzle art.

"Can you recall how the corpse was lying down?"

I nodded in response to that question, and stepped into the darkness. There were still traces of black blood beneath my feet, and I didn't have to work hard to recall that Ginji-san fill in the middle of two large, rusted sheets of metal with dust all over them.

"His head was facing this way, like this—"

I explained what I witnessed that morning to Alice in depth. But despite doing so, it felt so surreal to me.

Even till now, the police has yet to find Ginji-san's head. Also, since Major probably never stated who it was when he was investigated, the identity of the corpse remained unknown. Yui-san wanted to contact the police, but was cut off by her managing company. Currently, society only knew that an elderly homeless commonly known as Ginji was murdered.

That alone would be enough, right? We could simply let the matter be buried just like this. Even if we do dig up the truth, who'll be happy?"

"Narumi, take out the tablet."

Alice's words caused my thoughts to be disrupted, and I took it out. There were panorama videos divided into 3 hours on the monitor. The visual was optically corrected, but it was still too crude to be seen.

"If we enter the park from here…hm, we'll still be seen."

The tablet in my hands was connected in sync to the surveillance cameras in Alice's office, so that we could affirm that anyone entering the park would be caught on the surveillance cameras. Also, this allowed us to compare with the recording visual. It's true that this person parked the bicycle at that place, and ran up the stairs to the park. With that, it's certain that the figure at 5.30pm was me.

Alice knelt down near the metal sheets, and found a H-shape ditch the size of a palm at the barren ground in the middle of a grass patch. What was this mark?

I was too bored, and rewound the visual to 10pm or so at 10pm or so. After having a little, I exclaimed. Alice got up, and frowned at me.

"What is it?'

"There's a car here."

I expanded a portion of the screen, and Alice too leaned over. It was somewhat far from the park, but I could see a vague silhouette of a roof under the shadows of the building. Following that, what appeared to be Ginji-san got off the case. We didn't find this car back then. Which direction were the parking lots at again?

I switched the monitor over to the current visual, and tried walking out of the forest to affirm my position on the monitor. The car was parked on a slope. I gasped. That was a place I was familiar with.

"Narumi. W-wait!"

Alice could out anxiously from behind me, but I rushed down the stations, headed towards the pathway that was the other way from the station. At the left side of the end of the pedestrian pathway, there was a slope that was slightly lumped and exposed with holes of dirt. This was the place; the car in the visual was parked here.

I knelt down, searching for tire marks. The parking lot was really

cramped, and only the front end of the car could go in. The front wheels entered like this, and when going out, it would reverse…

Two sets of tire tracks.

With my fingers, I touched the tire marks that were clearly engraved onto the dirt ground.

"…Narumi, why did you suddenly run away!? Why did you leave me behind?"

Alice's frantic footsteps stopped beside me, and she then knelt down behind me. Her black hair and hem of her gown were touching the back of my hand.

"Two sets of tire marks." I said. Alice lifted her head, "This one probably belongs to the car we caught on camera."

Then, we checked on the other crushed, dried tire marks eroded by wind under the street lamps.

"It's the same set." Alice muttered. I too nodded.

I once spotted the car that was parked here, and that was a week ago. In other words, that car was probably the same as the one caught on the camera that night.

"It's Washio-san's car."

"Natsuki Yui's manager, huh?"

Alice said, and I nodded, enlarging the visual to the maximum possible. I couldn't determine the car make, probably it was because the visual was too crude. Was it really Washio-san's ? Then why did Ginji-san get off Washio-san's car? Was the figure down there really Ginji-san? Washio-san might be the culprit, right?

The memories reached out tentatively in my mind, trying to chain everything together.

Right. At that moment—when Yui-san disappeared, I remembered something was amiss in the phone call from Washio-san. Now, I finally understood.

Back then, Washio-san said, **"that person might not have been her father."**

Back then, I assumed that he was referring to the homeless Ginji-san not possibly being Katsuragi Kenji. In fact, it was impossible for Washio-san to say this, for he personally interacted with Ginji-san, and was sure he was her father.

Thus, **"that person might not have been her father."** there was another meaning to those words. In other words, that need not be the corpse of Ginji-san, or Katsuragi Kenji.

For the corpse was without a head.

Washio-san already knew that the corpse was beheaded.

How did he know? The police never publicly reveal this, and it was not reported on the news.

At this point, a possibility appeared in my mind. Washio-san personally witnessed the corpse, so in other words, he personally watched Washio-san's beheaded corpse, as the culprit.

I rattled off this spiel of hypothesis to Alice, and a chill crawled through my skin like a centipede as I did so.

But the detective's expression was the complete opposite to my tone; the more agitated I got, the calmer she was.

"Oh? I see."

Once she was done hearing me out, Alice frowned, and said,

"I've always forgotten how stupid you are, so I won't scold you today. This is an area of death, and I don't want to broke the peacefulness."

Her voice was several times frostier than the night air.

"And if you want to say that the culprit's Washio, mind explaining why the head was chopped off/'

"I—guess."

It's just my simple guess, but that man was very terrified of having everyone find out that Ginji-san was Natsuki Yui's father. If the tabloids were to find out that a rising idol's father was a wanderer who dithered at the park, it would become some really juice gossip material. Thus, he killed Ginji-san, and cut the head off to hide the identity.

“So how did he do it?” Alice asked as she looked at me with sleepy eyes.

“So he committed the crime somewhere else. Once he chopped the head off, he took the corpse to the park, and dumped it there. The person caught walking out of the car on the surveillance camera was Washio, who came to dump Ginji-san’s corpse. He dropped it in the park, and hid there till morning. Once he saw the onlookers, he came over, hid in the crowds, and escaped…”

I went on a lot passionate rant of guesses, but Alice merely sighed hard, saying,

“Have you heard of the saying that the Bible is infallible?’

“Infallible…what?”

“It is the insistence that the Bible is without any errors, and there’s no need to think and explain, just read it literally. If we believe in such sayings, the Earth should have been created by God in 7 days, at BC 4000 years. As you know however, by checking the fossils and crust, you’ll find that there is life long before God indicated. How do you think those that insist the Bible is infallible will explain the existence of the fossils and crust?”

I could only blink, unable to understand why Alice started talking about this out of a sudden?

“Because God buried those things that might cause humans misunderstandings into the ground 6,000 years ago.”

“Huh?” If such things could be believed, anything can be explained, “So why did God do such a thing?”

Upon seeing my expression, Alice’s eyes were as frosty as dry ice.

“So I want to ask you, why would Washio do such a thing?”

I finally understood the intent behind Alice’s words, and in the frosty winds, I could feel my cheeks and ears heating up in embarrassment. As she said, why would he do such a thing? If he wanted to chop off the head so that the corpse remains unidentified, couldn’t he just hide the corpse? Why chop the head off and drag the body to the park? The thought of settling a doubt coincided with the idea that the Bible is infallible. In fact, there was no benefit at all.

“This really sounds like some delusion you would weave about the world. You really aren’t suited for the profession of a detective.”

“Sorry…”

I was dejected, and glanced at Alice,

“B-but the possibility of that isn’t zero either! Washio-san’s a prime suspect right now. You saw his car on the camera too.”

Alice shrugged.

“If you really want to investigate Washio, do as you please. I have no interest in that.”

I was stunned. How did Alice end up having such a reaction?

“So you think the homeless killed Ginji-san? He got attacked by BB bullets, so I guess there’s a higher possibility of that.”

“Major said that he wanted to bear responsibility for this and make this his duty to deal with those brats playing soldier. We can leave those people to Major, I don’t have any interest in any of them.”

“No interest…huh?”

Alice’s words were too aloof for my tastes, but the petite detective grabbed the hem of my coat firmly, and gently nodded.

“I just want to know the reasons, and how the head was chopped off. I have no interest in the criminals.”

I let out white breath from my lips.

“Why?”

“Until I get the truth, I can’t explain.”

I was completely befuddled. She just wanted to know how the head got chopped off, and why? Didn’t need to know who the culprit is? What exactly was Alice trying to say?

“I came out of the walls to dig up the truth. Let’s continue investigating.”

Alice stood up, and tugged at the hem of my coat. With much scepticism, I brought Alice up the stairs, and returned to the park.

We passed through the blood stained metal sheets, and into the darkness.

There was a massive shadows under the black thick forest. It was the hut made of vinyl sheets, plywood and cardboard, Ginji-san's house. On a closer look, Ginji-san's house was rather large. The height was about as taller as Alice, and the area was no lesser than the NEET detective agency. There was also a few ropes made of nylon strings and tape holding down the place; it seemed it would not be easy to remove it.

Ginji-san probably insisted on not moving because his hut really couldn't be moved easily. They're homeless, so if they can move anywhere, they can go anywhere.

In accordance to Alice's instructions, I opened the plywood doors to check the inside. All possible clues for identification were taken away by the police, and there were only a few towels laid out on the cardboard.

We went to the back of the hut, and found tape of uneven lengths pasted on the walls of the cardboard. I guess Ginji-san probably taped them on to repair the damage from the airgun attacks from the other side of the railway. Alice pointed a finger at one of the marks that were not repaired, and turned to look at the railway. There were trendy street lights at the fence, and on the other side, there was an uneven stretch of darkness. The lights of the bustling streets at the other side was really far away.

Looks like Alice is searching for something, I thought.

Was she trying to estimate where the bullet was fired from? Was there a meaning to that? Can an airgun really kill someone from the other side of the railway? More importantly, Ginji-san was beheaded, so how can that be explained?

Assuming that those kids in military gear killed Ginji-san with modified airguns—and left bullet marks on the head, they chopped off his head to hide the evidence. Was that a possibility?

A high school kid? With a Japanese sword?

I started to feel that this theory was as stupid as the one I said about Washio-san being the culprit, and I shook my head. I really was unsuited to be a detective.

Alice tugged at the hem of my coat, and caused me to recover. She wanted me to bring her to the fence.

“What are you looking for?”

I wanted to ask, only to meet her in the eyes, and I stopped.

Of course, Alice was seeking the words of the dead. That was simply the job of a detective. Once found, the detective would then reconstruct the words in the heart, and would not explain until she found the person to convey them to.

Thus, I merley accompanied Alice through the forests, and walked to the metal fence by the railway. I felt that the weather got colder, probably due to the lack of shelter.

“There’s a hole here.”

Alice muttered, pointing at the feet. There was a little hole at the corner of the fence, large enough for a cat to slip through.

“If the culprit chopped off Ginji-san’s head and escaped from here, it’s true that the cameras won’t be able to capture it at that angle.

But I could not imagine the hole being big enough for a person to get through.

“I never said it was for a person.”

Then what? A shovel car? I stared at the other side of the hole, and there were a few short tracks of rust on the sandy grass patch. Alice remained speechless as she lifted her head up to look. She was staring at a chandelier-like street lamp, but there was no light on this night.

“…There was a fire in the Summer, right?”

“Eh, eh?”

Alice’s sudden words left me taken aback.

“The homeless mentioned to you that there was a little fire in the park, right?”

“Y-yes.”

I did remember Pe-san saying such a thing. Everyone blamed the

fire on the homeless for their vinyl bags and combustible huts, and it was increasingly difficult for them to stay there.

“Let’s go back.”

Alice leaned on me as she said,

“Is this really fine? Don’t you have anything else to investigate?’

“No need for that. I already understand.”

I stared at Alice’s face, and felt a chill run down my spine. Her eyes were filled with terrifying fury, and caused my throat to stiff.

How much did she know? Did she link all the clues together? Or that she already knew who did it, and why?

Tens of thousands of doubts rose up my throat like revolting gastric juices, and I did all I could to suppress it back in.

These shouldn’t be the words to be mentioned here.

No, these words might not be able to reach out to anyone, and rot in Alice’s heart.

I quietly asked Alice, *You aren’t suited to be a detective yourself, right? Every time you find an answer, you just look sad, wilted. Every time you’re done with your work, you always end up arriving at a dried desert. Even so, you continue to work your way towards the mirage of truth, never stopping. But that’s strange; humans can’t survive in a dry barren land. Is it because you’re a NEET, that if work is about creating valuable happiness, but you won’t be able to get that happiness when you cocoon yourself up, right?*

At this moment, I was so helpless, and I could only nod my head silently, holding Alice’s hand as I walked on.

To one to convey the words to. That would be—

“Yui-san said that she wants to stop the request.”

Once I saw the shutters of the ramen shop, I said that.

“…I see.”

Alice stiffly answered.

“Sorry. I wasn’t able to convince her.”

“It’s alright. I’ll deduct a whole lot from your pay. I’m used to work without an outcome.”

“Looks like Major too…wants to settle things by himself.”

“Yeah, because it concerns his pride.”

Then what should I do? With this bloody truth in mind, what could this useless detective do when she can’t be fertilizer or fuel?

At the dark corner of the emergency staircase, Alice stopped in her tracks, saying,

“We can only wait.”

“For what?”

“A miracle.”

Alice mentioned about miracles a few times, and the first time I heard of that, was during the incident involving Meo.

“Miracles can happen once to anyone, it’s just that most people don’t notice it when it happens.”

Alice insisted that she’s not a Christian, but such a notion should be similar to religion in itself. In other words, for the Japanese who typically don’t have much religious belief, a miracle would be like hitting a home run at the bottom of the ninth inning, or a plane accident that ended up with everyone still alive. For the Christians, without any hope, little things that happens to us are considered miracles. Not because of whosever prayers, not because of an overlapping coincidence, but that God wrote every miracle in the notebook.

But I had no religious belief, and could not wait.

The following afternoon, I gave the manager Washio a call, but it was mostly just to escape from reality. Even if it was for just a moment, I wanted to forget that I had no reason to continue investigating.

“I got something to talk to you about. Erm, Mori-san, Conductor

and Marienkhof-shi—ah, sorry, about the homeless who know Ginji-san. R-right, that's it. They know Ginji-san's real name. We're wondering if we should tell the police. Please lower your voice. I'm still in school. Yes, yes. Eh? Today? Meet today? Got it. I'll try asking them…money? About that, please ask them directly. 8pm? Okay, I understand. Location—"

Once we agreed on the rendezvous at night, I hung up, leaned my back on the icy wall, and sighed. Conning people really was a tiring thing to do, especially when I didn't have any trumps. Of course, the intel about Mori-san and the others telling me everything was a lie; I then gave a call to Tetsu-senpai.

"Can you get Mori-san and the others today…? Sorry for asking you do such a strange thing out of a sudden. Ah, it's fine. Just to scare him; don't worry if you can't get them all. Actually, it's fine even if nobody…really? Y-yes, thanks."

I hung up the phone, and just at that moment, the prep bell rang. The students were running down the corridor, and I looked out of the windows. There were only 5 minutes left for break time; should I give Major a call? *I don't care about that weird pride of yours; hurry up and spill the beans. How are you going to punish those brats from R High School alone?* Should I interrogate him with that.

I didn't know.

I recalled every word Alice said. She had she had no interests in criminals, only about how the head was chopped off, and why. I didn't know what that meant. Couldn't she get the answers to both as long as we found the culprit? Or is it that we can't catch him without knowing how?

Of course, we can't find the reason and method. There is no large machinery in the park, and the surveillance cameras never caught sight of any machinery that were moved in and out. No matter who we suspected, we would end up with these two issues. With that, it would be a waste of effort for this stupid detective assistant to act independently without a client's request.

While I hesitated, the prep bell continued ringing. The teacher could be seen around the corner of the corridor, so I kept my phone, and walked into the classroom.

"…So, how's the jail food?"

"Who knows? What about you, Tetsu? You know?"

"I don't. Hey, I haven't been to a Boys' Home, I'm a good kid! Were you caught and put somewhere before, Mori-san?'

"Nope. Only the detention center."

"The food there is the worst of all. They gave me two straight days of the same thing." "There's no budget."

The conversation could be heard from the concrete arch beneath the bridge of the railway. I looked around, and peeked in.

"Oh, isn't that Narumi? Brought food over?"

Mori-san was the first to discover me, and lifted his head. Gathered at the scene in a circle were 4 of the homeless and Tetsu-senpai. The chilly breeze could not enter between the 4 pillars supporting the railway, and it was relatively warm with everyone huddled up.

"Sorry for having to get everyone here."

I lowered my head, and at the same time, handed the convenience store bag to the older men; the fragrance of yakitori and meat buns filled the cramped place.

"Everyone got arrested before?"

Recalling the chilling conversation from before, I cautiously asked,

"Only Major got taken back, we just answered the questions on the spot." Conductor answered. Every time, he was dressed in suit, and polite in tone. He might have the appearance of a higher management member of a company, but he was really an actual homeless folk.

"We went over because Major called us over." Pe-san answered.

"Called? As in cellphone? You have one?"

"Oho, you're treating us as idiots now, Narumi?" "Let us teach you the harshness of reality!"

"If you want to do day jobs, a cellphone is a must!" "I don't have since I can't pay the phone fees…"

“So-sorry.”

I was too ignorant. So in such times, even the homeless needed a cellphone, huh?

Mori-san nodded.

“Ginji-san was already like that when he arrived.”

“But in any case, there’s no need to kill him like that…”

“Wat’ll happen to the corpse?” “Probably dissected, and he’ll become a lonely ghost.” “We might end up like that too.”

Everyone’s voice got weaker, and finally silence. The train passed by from time to time, letting out a resounding boom that wiped out the sound of everyone chomping on cup ramen and fried chicken.

For them, Ginji-san was someone very important. Thus, his death brought about such a deep, impressionable emptiness, and also proved that he wasn’t alone when he was alive.

“Narumi, aren’t you trying to find out who killed Ginji-san?”

Mori-san asked quietkly. That bald head was dyed red due to drunkenness.

“…Yes. I invited everyone here to assist in this. You don’t have to do anything much. I just need an excuse and threat.”

“Hm? Tetsu, you too?”

“I’m fine with not looking for the culprit. I don’t get any pay out of this.”

Senpai’s tone was kind enough as it was.

“It’s just that I have sharp instincts, and I guess you called me here to scare some people, right, Narumi?”

Senpai directed his stare at me, and I nodded,

“Did that guy kill Ginji-san?” Pe-san asked.

“No, I’m not yet—” while I was about to say that I was still uncertain, footsteps and a long slender figure appeared behind me. I turned around, and found a savage looking young man dressed in a

white down jacket. It was the manager Washio. He removed what was likely a pair of plain lens glasses, and put them into the chest pocket, stepping into our gathering spot.

“A lot of you here.”

Washio-san sounded somewhat spiteful, glared at us, and stared at me,

“I’ll state beforehand that I have no money. If you’re intending to extort me, I’ll start off stubborn.”

“What’s with that out of a sudden?” Pe-san said, “Who are you?”

“I saw him a few times at the park.”

“He spoke with Ginji-san before.”

The homeless men’s conversation left Washio-san a little startled. It was unsurprising as he had assumed the homeless would try to extort him, but nobody recognized him. I stood up, and retreated slightly so that Washio-san could enter the space.

“Sorry, I lied to you on the phone.”

Washio-san’s face gurned.

“I just want to talk to you about something, and lied to you to get you out.”

Suddenly, I noticed that Tetsu-senpai had walked towards the path leading outside, his arms folded as he stood behind Washio-san. He probably did that to prevent Washio-san from turning away and running in shock. Really, I was grateful to him about that.

“What is it that you want to talk to me about?”

“I want to ask you about this; on December 16, the night before the incident, you drove out to bring Ginji-san back to the park, didn’t you?”

I kept quiet, and watched Washio-san’s reaction. His face looked as thoug there was a thin layer of dirt sticking onto it, for he became stoic-faced.

“…Erm, I’m not trying to fish something out of you, or that you need to make an excuse. We got all the necessary evidence, and the

surveillance cameras recorded images of your car and Ginji-san doing the same."

What I said was a lie. The tire marks could only be considered as weak evidence, and the visual of the car was too small to be seen cleanly. Hearing this, Washio-san sighed, his shoulders relaxing.

"Yes, I did send him back to the park. So what?"

Like him, I too felt relieved. Ever since I became a detective assistant, I started picking up ways to lie that should not be done. Then, I spotted senpai behind Washio-san giving a sneaky grin.

"I don't know what you're guessing, but I just so happened to meet that man when I was on the way back to the park, and brought him back. On the car, I was just begging him to leave the park, and I did notify the police about this."

Washio-san started to speak faster, probably because he was pressurized by the stares of Mori-san, Pe-san, Conductor and Marienkhof-shi staring at him.

"I too was shocked…to hear of his passing. I didn't expect you guys to suspect me. I don't have a reason to kill. Why would I want to do such a stupid thing?"

"Then, how did you know that…Ginji-san's head was chopped off?"

Washio-san immediately widened his eyes, his throat croaking.

As I asked him, I started to sense my voice calming down. I instinctively realized that he wasn't the culprit. He lowered his eyes, and nudged his toes into the dirt as though he wanted to crush something.

"Of course, it was the people at Hercules who told me that. The reconstruction work is started by the town council, and of course, the police informed them of the details. I'm not sure of the source, but it's likely the people at the town council informed the people at Hercules.

I sighed, and lowered my shoulders. At this point, it all made sense, fifty thousand times more plausible than the theory of Washio-san being the culprit I said to Alice.

"Is that all you want to talk about? Why bluff me out just for this

little thing?"

This time, I lowered my head. However, I had a feeling I had something to ask about.

I heard a voice behind me.

"You're the last one to meet Ginji-san, right?"

Mori-san asked. Washio-san frowned, and put on the plain lens glasses.

"Is that so? I don't know. I didn't intend for that. I'll say it again, I just wanted to discuss things with him."

"We're not blaming you here. What did Ginji-san say to you at the end?"

They want to know what he said at the end? I turned around to look at Mori-san. Pe-san, Conductor and Marienkhof-shi were seated cross-legged on the floor, staring at him intently.

"Like our conversation from before. I said I was willing to take care of him for a moment, but that stubborn man said that he would never leave the park, even if he died. He insisted that it had nothing to do with Yui; he didn't want to recognize his daughter, and didn't want to meet her. So why did he want to remain in the park? Is there a treasure there or something?"

Washio-san said, and looked away, probably realizing how agitated he was. The four homeless looked at each other, and nodded in unison.

"…Then…"

"Right."

"He found it, huh?"

"Hey, you know something?" Washio-san went towards my side, and bent down to ask Mori-san.

The latter merely nodded, and Pe-san beside him answered.

"Ginji-san found his home."

Washio-san snorted, and got up.

"…How foolish."

He said, and retreated to the road, glaring at the homeless who were squatted around the warm air.

"You guys are wanderers, no place to call home. No matter where you stay at, it's—"

Conductor and Mori-san got up, wanting to argue back, but Washio-san's cellphone suddenly rang. He retreated to the fence, and fished out his cellphone.

"…Yes, eh? Yui? Sorry, can't hear you. It's noisy behind me…eh? Yes, yes…I-I'll be right there!"

Without realizing it, I hurried after Washio-san while the latter was leaving.

"Why are you following me? Aren't we done?"

"What happened to Yui-san?"

Washio-san stopped, and glared at me, giving a look of one looking to strangle someone else.

"She collapsed. She's in the hospital."

I don't suppose anyone had any good memories of the hospital, but my own memories of the hospital were all really terrible. Every time, it's always about dying people lying on the bed, and I could only shrink on the round stool, being all helpless. On that day, it was the same.

"…She didn't eat well, did she? Are you her older brother? Her manager!? Please take care of her living conditions. If you underestimate anaemia…"

The doctor told off Washio-san on the other side of the bed as I was collapsed on the chair by the bedside, staring at Yui-san. Her face was pale, her messy hair looking like hard wax, her closed eyelids not twitching. She really looked like a corpse if not for the chest huffing as she breathed.

A burly man in his 50s or so, dressed in golf wear suddenly slammed the door open and barged in. *Please calm down, chairman.*

Washio-san immediately stood up, and the duo got into any argument. *Is Yui fine? How is she? Hey, who's that brat? Please don't raise your voice, we're in the hospital. Is that brat Yui's boyfriend? How didn't I know about this? Chairman, please head outside the ward room —*

Amidst this commotion, Yui-san opened her eyes slightly.

"Yui!"

Washio-san immediately noticed her waking up, grabbed the bed frame, and stared at her.

"…Eh…I…"

Yui-san poked her hand out from under the blanket, trying to block out the light, probably because it was too bright. However, her hand trembled feebly, and landed on her forehead. She ended up shaking the drip tube, and the metal frame let out a sound.

"Why…huh? Narumi-kun?"

"You idiot!" Washio-san lashed out, "Good thing it was a recording. What if it had been a live show?"

Yyu-san snuggled back under the blanket in fear.

"Please get out if you want to make a commotion!" The young doctor told the duo off harshly, shoving them out of the room.

"How dire is her situation now? Does she need to stay in? If there's a way to get her discharged."

Washio-san asked as he grabbed the doctor by the collar. They're basically arguing. *You all can vanish for all I care,* malicious thoughts appeared in my mind.

"She doesn't need to stay in the hospital, but you can tell that she needs rest for the time being. Hey, you too! Get out!" The doctor turned around to me.

At this moment, I subconsciously blurted,

"Please let me be able to with Yui-san for the time being."

The eyes under the plain lenses of Washio-san widened largely, and the chairman in golf wear was looking flushed. The doctor scowled.

“Just for a while. I’ll talk a little, and if she calms down, I’ll go back.”

Unexpectedly, Washio-san was the first to budge. He tugged at the sleeve of the chairman, saying *this brat is okay. Let him try talk Yui out of it and get her to calm down.* Once done, he led the chairman out of the room while the latter continued to utter something. Finally, “Just 5 minutes.” the young doctor said with a scowl on his face, and vanished behind the door.

The silence finally came upon us, like an ice block crushing at my throat. I sighed, and turned to the top of the bed.

With a look of disbelief, Yui-san stared at me.

“You didn’t eat? That’s what the doctor said.”

“I don’t have any appetite.”

“You didn’t sleep much either, did you? Your make up is a little hick.”

“Nooo, you shouldn’t have said it even if you noticed it!”

Yui-san probably wanted to laugh, but her face was showing a cracked expression.

After some silence, she asked,

“…Why did you come along too, Narumi-kun?”

“Well…I just so happened to come by with Washio-san.”

“Just so happened?”

I was a little hesitant, but discussed to spill the beans.

I told her that on the night before the incident, Washio-san met with Giniji-san. To affirm if he was the cuklprit, I called him out. Thus, I had to report to her about their conversation. Ginji-san did not want to meet Yui-san, and did not want to recognize her. Once she heard that, her expression did not change.

“Why are you continuing with the investigation?”

Yui-san stared at the ceiling, asking with a parched voice,

“Didn’t I say that I want to cancel the request? Why are you still continuing with it? And if Washio-san really was the culprit, you could have been killed?”

It appeared Yui-san wanted to joke with me, as once she was done, she patted me on the shoulder. However, her overly cheerful voice left me uneasy.

Why did we want to continue with the investigation?

I stared at the gap beween the round stool and the bed, hearing the groaning of the warm air as I pondered over the reason.

“…Knowing the truth is as good as dying.”

Yui-san turned her head around slightly.

“That’s Alice’s mantra. She always said that there’s no turning back once we know, and in other words, that part of the other person. If nobody requests anything from her, she won’t dig up ther truth.”

Yui-san’s troubled eyes were wavering between the ceiling and my face.

“Her way of action as a detective will always end up hurting a certain person deliberately. It’s like there’s a locked room, yet she went to open it, to show you that it’s empty inside. However, nobody will be happy by her actions, and instead, a certain part of everyone’s hearts die off.”

Because I was the same, and Tetsu-senpai, Yondaime, Min-san and the others were the same. I opened my hands, seeking traces of blood. I could no longer see them, but I clearly remembered them.

“Bu-but.”

Again, I clenched my fists slightly.

“Just a bit—my heart just feels a little more relaxed than before. It’s just a little, but we can again take a step forward. The hole in the heart remains, but even though it remains we can go forward even with this hole inside.”

I bit my lower lips. As expected, I could explain it well. After I was done, I couldn’t sense Yui-san’s response. It’s like trying to sculpt something in the water, trying to create some kind of image.

“This is what being a detective is about. If you find that it’s pain—”

I stared at Yui-san’s expression face.

“No matter when, you can ask us for help.”

Once I said that, I found something was strange. It felt that I was the one pleading to be saved. Yui-san’s face changed expressions a few times.

“Why?”

She sounded as though she was on the verge of tears.

“Why am I feeling sad? Why is it, when the one vanishing is someone who never existed?”

I really wanted to cover my ears. Saying that, Yui-san stared at the ceiling silently.

I wanted to cover my ears. Once she was done, Yui-san again stared at the ceiling silently.

I too wondered why we felt so sad. It was just the death of someone who never existed, so why did we feel sadness when God created us? Unable to understand, I stood up from my chair, and went for the door.

The NEETs, starting with Alice, have a narrow-minded belief of not taking action without any request. After what I experienced this past Winter, I understood really well that it was a reasonable idea. Without a compass, navigation map and a sextant, I would be drifting in the oceans with a drift board, and it really was taxing. In some cases, I might end up drifting further away from land.

However, this stupid and paranoid me was a brat who couldn’t be a NEET, unable to remain still. The following day, after school, I had Kaoruko-senpai create an excuse for me to head to R high school. This time I went to the student council office to greet them.

“You have your graduation ceremony on the 24th? Us too. Let’s go for a gathering once the graduation ceremony ends! I’m a platinum member of the Karaoke shop, so it’s going to be cheap. Remind to call Kaoruko-san along. I’ll get the student sof T Girls High and Y

Girls Academy to come along. I'll be counting on you, Fujishima-senpai."

I went to exchange the club activity pamphlets with the student council president of R High School, who was as enthusiastic as usual.

I pretended to stare at the introductory pamphlets stacked on the table in a nonchalant manner, and asked,

"I heard your school has a strange club called the History Research club."

I could sense everyone else other than the president wince.

"You know a lot."

"Ah, erm, one of my friends is a graduate."

A third year reading manga in a corner of the room nearly fell off from the chair.

"That graduate you talk of, eh, is that…that Mukai…"

"Right, Mukai Hitoshi. You know him?"

Was he around when the 3rd years first entered? Maybe he might be way older? As I started guessing Major's age, there was already a commotion amongst the student council members.

"So you're an acquaintance of Mukai-senpai, Fujishima-senpai?" "No wonder." "The atmosphere, somehow." "Mukai-senpai? "I heard he's the guy who caused the college scholarship budget of our school to be cut by half…" "Ahhh…"

What kind of urban legends did he leave behind? I wondered with a hand on my forehead. With a disgusted look, the student council president said, "I guess you know the history research club is just a resting place for military otakus, a survival game club."

"I do. Right. They have a member called Hirabayashi, right? Heard he's just a first year."

"…Hirabayashi is in my class." The president said.

"A-ahh, I-I see. Erm, I only know of his name, that's all."

Even I too felt that the topic was too forced, and hurriedly tried to round things off.

“Well, that Major—no, about that Mukai-san told me that if I am to drop by at R High School, I’m to visit Hirabayashi since the guy looks like he has some troubles and has been taking breaks. Speaking of which, did Hirabayashi come to school today?”

“He did! Probably to attend make-up classes.”

I was lying when I said that he was taking breaks, and I didn’t expect that to be the case. Hirabayashi had been taking makeup classes after school to catch up on his academics.

The classroom of 1-7 on the third floor was located closest to the stairs, and to avoid others, I sat at the stairwell, waiting for his lessons to end.

This is a strange way of avoiding reality, I muttered to myself as I felt the cold concrete under my backside.

A detective would act as one because one because he wanted to avoid the truth nobody else wanted to understand.

After the bell at 5pm rang for a while, I spotted a teacher entering his old age open the door and walk out, followed by the back door opening. A diminutive figure in uniform walked onto the corridor, and it was clearly the first year student I spotted at the club. He had the appearance of a middle school student, probably because of how small he looked. There were some bruises at the edge of his lips, his eyes had some ban aids. I ran down the corridor, and called for him.

“Erm—”

Startled, he turned around. At first, he could not recognize me, and once he saw my uniform it appeared he recalled. He showed a skeptical look on his face.

“…You’re the one who came to our club…is there anything you need?”

“I want to ask you about the night of the 16th.”

He put his bag on his shoulder, and started running, jumping down the stairs two steps at a time. I hurriedly gave case, but he was not

headed for the clubroom, but towards to the entrance.

“Wait, I just want to ask something. Just want to ask!”

He continued ignoring my shouts as he darted down to the entrance, put on his shoes, and ran out. Despite the surrounding stares of the R High school students leaving me awkward, I hurriedly put on my shoes and ran out. His back, dressed in uniform, had already ran off to the back door.

“I told you to stop!”

I caught him near the back door, and luckily, it was a quiet residential area with few people.

“What do you want?”

He waved my hand off.

“This has nothing to do with you!”

“The police has specified the type of gun used. It’s only a matter of time.”

I quietly noted. Of course, it was just my threat, but he went silent. The bag nearly slipped from his shoulders, and he carried it again, turning his back on me.

“…What do you want exactly? Mukai-senpai too came to look for me…”

“The homeless guy who was killed is someone we know, and we’re investigating.”

I tried my best to speak with a gentle tone, explaining to the back of the uniform that appeared to be on the verge of snapping.

“Major’s a maniac, and he found you out faster than the police.”

“I don’t know.”

“I think you may be mistaken. I’m not here to pursue responsibility. I don’t care whether you’re the culprit. I just want to know what happened that night.”

“I don’t know!”

Again, Hirabayashi tried to walk on, and I grabbed the belt of his bag. He turned around to yell,

“LET GO OF—”

“—Vice-Admiral Fujishima?”

I heared a sudden voice from behind me, and following that, a figure in camouflage colors entered my sights. The little hand in leather glove grabbed my arm firmly, and the eyes under the visor were narrowed, glared at me in rage.

“Major…”

“Why are you here? What business do you have with Private Hirabayashi?”

I could not answer Major, and so I avoided his eyes. He then grabbed my arm more forcefully, causing me to let go of Hirabayashi’s bag.

“I told you this is our internal matters. Don’t interrupt.”

“This isn’t your matter alone, Major! This is a case the client asked us to handle!”

“I heard she cancelled it.”

I was left speechless as Major saw through my lie. It was all my selfish motivation. Hirabayashi’s just a stranger, and I had no right to question him.

“Private Hirabayashi, why are you running away?”

Major grabbed Hirabayashi by the collar, and dragged him over.”

“I came here today to ask you personally. All prior contacts had some failure, and I found that the gas, batteries and bearings were all bought under your name. Did you attend every mock battle?”

“It has nothing to do with you, senpai.”

“Who took part in the mock battles on the night of the 16th? I asked you especially because you bought so much consumables, but not the guns. Your personal gun should be the Uzi sub machine gun for beginners you bought at the Mukai seminar when you first

joined, and unable to fire bearings."

I was stunned. Did Major find out that much?

"Were you set up?"

"…It has nothing to do you you."

"Who shot?"

"I don't know."

"Stop fooling around and answer. Did they command you to keep quiet? Don't worry, I'm going to punish them."

"Please, leave me alone!"

Hirabayashi waved off Major's hand.

"You're no longer a member, senpai. Please don't say anymore."

"Why are you protecting them? This isn't even a notion of comradeship. Have you forgotten the rules of a soldier?"

"I said I don't know!" Hirabayashi suddenly knocked Major aside on the shoulder.

"I'm your commander! Trust me! I'll ensure your safety!"

"How do you intend to get me to trust you? You graduated for who know how long, and you don't know how the club is right now! Why did you encourage me to join the history research club? I don't want to play any survival games. I shouldn't have joined."

Just looking at Major's back was enough for me to understand how dejected he was, and he even let go. Hirabayashi put his bag onto the shoulder, turned around, and walked away. Major and I could only watch the back of the black uniform. The right hand of Major, covered in leather glove, quivered as it remained clenched, and then let go again.

I felt that I had to say something.

"…You knew that first year for a long time?"

"During summer break, we would get along with the elite students of the affiliated middle school for some study meet, and we played

together then."

Major sensed that he let slip of something, and kept quiet. He gave a look implying that he should not have told me, and continued on,

"If I can report, I will. Go finish your mission, Vice-Admiral."

"What do you intend to do? What if they are the real culprits?"

"I told you I'll handle it by myself!"

"Then how—"

"You don't need to know, Vice-Admiral."

Major said as he pointed a finger at my chest, and turned around to leave. I bent down, took a deep breath, and wanted to yell at the back of the small figure dressed in camouflage jacket. However, I could not say anything, and merely gather my emotions in my palms as I slapped at my thighs.

What finish my mission? If I could, I would have done it. Right now, I don't have a compass, navigation map, and no sextant. I'm unable to finish the mission Alice tasked me with, and I don't know what to say to Yui-san when she's hiding under the wrinkled clothes. Major, what are you feeling actually? Are you trying to protect your former comrades, or not hoping for their sins to be laid out under the sun? I did say that to Hirabayashi to scare him, but the police aren't idiots; they'll figure out this clue soon. Why exactly do you insist on your ideals? Why does everyone bend down and cover their ears? What do I do exactly?

This inexplicable rage became dust that seeped through the gaps between my fingers. The frosty northern winds pricked at my ears, and at this point, I realized that I left my coat in the student council office. I put my hands into my pocket, and went towards the back door.

It was completely dark when I arrived at Hanamaru. It's the season where the day is shorter after all. It was yet to be evening though, and there were no customers to be seen behind the curtains, only Min-san alone busy with the preparations to open the shop.

Right in front of the back door, I spotted two figures seated, facing each other in front of a wooden table.

“I’m going to attack this piece. Mine is Major!”

“Too bad. Mine’s a landmine!”

“Again? Your layout is really annoying.”

“I’m going to start attacking from the right then. I’m attacking here. Mine is Vice-Admiral.”

“It’s Major!” “Ahh damn it!”

“What are you two doing…?’

It’s Tetsu-senpai and Hiro, and there was something similar to a shogi table laid out between them, with several thousand yen notes by the side. These damned NEETs only know how to gamble, goodness me.

“Welcome back, Narumi.” Hiro-san looked away from the board, beaming.

“Don’t talk to me, or else I’ll forget my layout.” Tetsu-senpai again stared at the board.

“Shogi?...doesn’t look like it.”

“It’s soldier shogi. Do you know?’

I know soldier shogi. It’s a game using the ranks of the soldier to attack and defend. However, there are a dozen or so pieces that lappeared dead, and I felt weird.

“Why only ‘Major’ and ‘Vice-Admiral’?”

“It’s the ‘Hanamaru soldier shogi’ we came up with.” Tetsu-senpai gleefully answered, “Only Major, Vice-Admiral and landmine.” What is this…

Hiro explained,

“Major beats Vice-Admiral, because he doesn’t think of Narumi as much.”

“Ehh, well…”

“But Vice-Admiral beats landmines, because you always trample on them, Narumi.” “What do you mean!?”

And thus, the Vice-Admiral piece in senpai's territory got trampled by Hiro's Major piece, so the former had to fork out money bitterly.

"Argh, I'll stop wit this. This Vice-Admiral is really useless, completely useless." You're referring to the game, right? Senpai? Is it just me, or is there spite in those words?

"Hey, you NEETs!" Min-san poked her head out from the back door. "I'm not charging you for that, but try out a new flavour."

A delighted looking Hiro and a reluctant Tetsu-senpai walked into the shop, while I sat on a beer crate chair, spacing out. Again, Min-san opened the back door, saying,

"Hurry in! Or it's going to clump together."

"Ah…yes."

At the very least, trying out new flavors would require me to use my tongue. Thinking about that, I got up, and walked into the shop.

The new flavour was a meat miso ramen, a relatively standard one for Min-san. Tetsu-senpai kept praising it, while Hiro advised that it might be too sweet. I took a bite of noodles and drank some of the soup, remaining still as I held onto the hot bowl.

The icy feeling I felt when I met Major was practically melting away in other ways.

Tetsu-senpai ordered some beer, and started drinking with Hiro. Min-san lowered the volume of the TV, and started washing the pot. The steam covered her upper body, yet I felt exceptionally cold, so I took another gulp.

"Narumi."

Min-san's words caused me to lift my head.

"Seriously, I won't be helping you again."

"…Eh?"

"I won't let you have any more free ice cream. Given ow thick-headed you are, how many times do you want me to repeat it?"

"…Oh, eh?"

“It means people view you favourably, Narumi. You should try and improve your stock, Narumi.”

Hiro added as he gave a mischievous smirk.

“Hiro, you play stocks?”

“Not me, but the madams.”

“What did you say about the madams again?”

“Min-san, you’re holding a chopper! It’s scary!”

“Oh really? As long as you keep saying the wrong things, I’ll start doing the wrong things.”

“I’ll start buying stocks too. Can I buy with three different bills.”
“It’s not horseracing.”

I nonchalantly listened in on their conversation, slurping at the increasingly cold ramen. What was everyone hoping about me? There was a clear antagonist in every case before this. I knew who I should punch, and who I should run away from. This time, it’s different. Nobody made a request to me, and nobody hated me. I was just a flag bearer, a pipe, a detective assistant who was powerless to do anything other than words.

At this moment however, a sound attracted my attention.

I lifted my head.

I looked around, seeking the sound that rattled my heart. It’s not Min-san, she’s cutting the onions silently; Hiro and Tetsu-senpai are discussing about horse racing enthusiastically. Who exactly was it?

I finally realized that it was the television. There was a homely looking set of a studio with sofas and a round table on the screen. On the right side was a famous manzai pair acting as hosts, and the left side was—Yui-san who was seated there. She was dressed in a turtle neck sweater, a short wool skirt, and long white boots. She was oozing with sexiness on the channel, chatting with the two hosts. There was the word ‘live’ at the bottom right corner of the TV, indicating that it was a live broadcast. I guess it was a special programme to have a live airing at this time. 24 hours ago, she was as good as dead, and now she’s able to smile so heartily in front of the camera. All I could wonder was whether she needed my help.

For her, the rectangular world of light was her home. Once she returned to the studio, no matter when it was, she could forget her tears and smile to the tens of thousands of people out there. Why did you come to the NEET detective agency? You alone could have —

I stared at the bottom left corner of the small TV screen.

Yui-san, seated on the sofa, had a brown little thing placed by her waist.

It was an owl doll.

Once I noticed the tail of the owl Yui-san's right hand was gripping, I immediately left the bowl of ramen on the counter, and ran out. "Hey, Narumi?"Min-san called out for me, but her voice vanished behind the door. I got to the back door, and ran up the emergency staircase. I knocked on the door leading to the NEET detective agency, and opened it without pressing the intercom.

"What, Narumi? You should at least press the bell!"

Alice, seated on the bed, turned around to glare at me, and I rushed into the room, saying,

"TV! Switch on the TV!"

"TV?"

"Just switch it on."

Alice frowned, and tapped at the keyboard, one of the monitors on the rack at the wall showed a TV show. There were the sofas, round tables, two hosts and Yui-san. Alice's eyes widened slightly.

"…I heard you have dolls in your room, Yui-chan?" One of the manzai members asked.

"I couldn't help but buy them on the internet."

"I have a lot of them in my room too!" "How unexpected." "I have 5 Gachapins and a Mukku propeller."

"I want to buy Mukkus dolls too! Propellers are just ordinary fans! " "Ahahaha."

"What dolls do you have, Yui-chan?"

“I can’t talk much when I don’t have any dolls with me.”

“Ahh, that one you have. An owl? Owl? Right? It’s really rare.”

“It’s rare, isn’t it? I got it from a friend, and she has double the dolls I have! She really is knowledgeable about them, and I heard this owl is the goddess of wisdom and courage.”

“You’re courageous yourself. You were smacking at my head without holding back.”

“Ahaha. That was out of my own impulse. Actually, the real me is always scared and nervous, and I’m always shivering at the rest area in the backstage. Without the dolls, I really can’t appear on shows”

“Ah, I just saw you holding the doll and muttering alone.”

“No, please don’t mention that!”

“What were you muttering? A mantra?”

“Of course not! I was saying, pleaes save me”

Startled, I turned towards Alice.

The lights on the monitor shone on Alice’s face, showing a ting little shadow, and Yui-san in her eyes were staring at the Minerva in the hands, again muttering,

“I just said to the doll ‘please save me’, just—save me.”

Alice’s hands slipped off the keyboard, and she switched off the monitor. Again, there was only the silence mixed with the noise of the fans in the room, and with bated breath, I stared at Alice’s sidelong face, waiting for the detective’s words.

Alice lowered her head, her flowing black hair completely covering her face. However, she immediately stood up again, and turned towards me.

Her eyes were filled with blaring anger.

“Narumi.”

I nodded.

“Did you tell her—that I’m the speaker of the dead?”

Again, I nodded firmly.

To know is to die, that was what I told Alice. Once I said that, her face was filled with life.

“Got it. Good work. You did well.”

Again, Alice knelt down on the blanket, and picked up the phone. Through the doors, walls and concrete floor, I could hear the ‘Colorado Bulldog’ ringtone downstairs.

“Tetsu? It’s me. **we received a request again.** Right…right, yes. Pass the word to Yondaime. The more people we have, the better.”

Again, I listened to Alice’s voice, and clasped my hands together, filling the warmth and sweat on my palms. Alice hung up, and again looked at me.

“There’s only one thing left.”

“…What is it.”

“I understand it all, except for one final piece I’m lacking.”

To connects facts with truths, Alice muttered.

“We may lose a friend or so for the sake of that one piece. However —”

“I’ll do it.”

Alice looked up from my chest, and I took it head on, saying,

“Let me beat up Major.”

Chapter 5

Non-mainstream culture clubs would typically have activities far differed from their group's name, like our school's 'Onsen Travelling Club' actually being a gathering for those who like the train schedules. There's also a certain school's 'cultural music research club' being actually a full blown rock and roll club. Obviously, the reason why they would come up with such funny names to pull bluffs on the teachers just to set up their clubs.

However, the history research club was a serious club researching on 19th century European history, as its name implied. As to why it ended up being a survival game club full of gun techniques and military nerds, well, the reason's obvious. A certain member 6 years ago turned the club from one filled with loads of history book into an armory.

"As expected, the period with the most members was when Major was in school, and now there are only 8 of them. Half of them are in their 3rd years, and they hardly participated in club activities."

Alice said as she stared at the monitor.

It was the day after Yui-san made a request to us again, December 23rd—the birthday of the Emperor, and also the day I had to go to school for makeup due to lack of attendance in the 2nd semester. I spent half the day in school for makeup classes, and only arrived in the office at evening. By this point, Alice had already investigated lots of things. Shown on the monitor were the files with the enlarged passport photographs of all the members in the R high school history research club, and I didn't know how she managed to obtain such investigation. I scanned the 4 files shown on 4 different monitors, and they were the ones I met when I went to R High school with Major.

Kirayama Takuji, Second Year, the sick looking glasses guy who talked with Major.

Ooshima Kunihiro, Second Year.

Tadokoro Shinya, Second Year.

And Hirabayashi Minoru, First Year.

So back then, the guys were actual club members?

“Some graduates would will drop by from time to participate in games. They use commercial fields for play, so there will be records. Probably spare time after entering college.”

Alice’s fingers raced on the keyboard, and following this, there were the faces of three young men.

“The seven of them went about buying and modifying metal bullets and gun technology that allows them to fire from afar, and we know for sure that they fired from outside the park, so for the time being, investigate on them first.”

“They’re…the culprits?”

I could not help but try to affirm this, and Alice showed a vexed look.

“I told you that I have no interests in criminals. I want to investigate them because they have the final piece to the puzzle, the moment Katsuragi Kenji died.”

I didn’t know what Alice meant at all. In that case, did they mean that they weren’t the culprits? We’re already sure that they fired from afar, but why chop the head off? They never entered the park.

But Alice completely ignored my doubts, and turned to face the keyboard.

“I didn’t know who among the seven were shooting at the homeless, but the frequency of them going out at night had increased. The dates they went out are aligned, so I guess there’s a high chance of them going out shooting together.”

I sighed.

“You really obtained a lot of information over the past two days.”

Or I guess she had already investigated on them beforehand, like usual.

“I didn’t find out about this. Alice merely shrugged. “Someone already did it, and all I did is to have a peek at his computer.”

“Investigated…who?”

Before Alice could answer, I could hear the door being opened violently. Shocked by the violent footsteps, I turned around to look, and found my answer standing there. The camouflage suit with holsters all over it made Major look fatter than he was, and the helmet and large visor practically covered his small face. I could clearly sense anger from his eyes. He pushed me aside, went to the bed, stared at the files of the R high school history research club, and glared at Alice.

“You hacked into my system?”

“I did? You investigated thoroughly there.”

The fist covered in leather gloves landed hard on the mattress, and Alice continued staring at Major with a stoic look.

“You were really careless there. If you wanted to duel against me, you should have unplugged all the internet cables.”

“I have no intention of battling you.”

“Most wars in history are started from those who never intended to be enemies; you should know this better than I do.”

Major left the bedside angrily.

“I respect your insistence as a soldier. From now on, it’ll be a race to see who’ll be the first to discover the truth hidden by the history research club.”

“Hmph.”

Major snorted, and turned to head for the corridor. I called out for him.

“Anything you want, Vice Admiral?”

“Why—aren’t you willing to help us? We’re already at this point.”

“I said it, didn’t I? Any trouble caused by the subordinates should be dealt with by the superior.”

“How much longer are you going to insist on maintaining that stupid pride of yours?”

“If I didn’t have to bear any stupid self pride, I would have skipped grades to graduate from the research lab and work at a large car

manufacturer."

Major tapped my chest hard with his fist.

"My conquest is based on unbeneficial, pointless and a lack of duty."

"I don't understand that you're saying."

"If you don't, it's fine. It means that you aren't completely a lost cause."

I grabbed Major's arm with my left hand, and swung my right fist at him. I really wanted to punch him, but I couldn't move at all due to the hard, icy thing on my abdomen.

Major had a TV remote control-sized in his other hand, pressing at my abdomen. There were two sharp electrodes on it, and it was a taser."

"Don't force me. I did set it to a point where it won't kill, but I did modify it."

Major muttered, and I could sense the fury coming from those electrodes. *Do it if you dare, you bastard!* I thought.

"What are you doing?"

I could hear Alice's voice and frantic footsteps from behind. She wrapped her slender arms around my waist, and pulled me away from Major.

"Wh-what are you planning to do to my assistant? If we still have some form of friendship left, get out of here!"

Stunned, I stood by the fridge, and watched Major walk out of the office with his large backpack. Alice's arms continued to remain latched around my waist.

"If you're my detective assistant, you should have fought more rationally! If you actually punched him, do you know what would have happened?"

I nodded, and broke free from Alice's arms, glaring at Major as he closed the door. I wondered why Major dropped by, and if it was just to say some meaningless things, why did he make a trip here? He could have just said it elsewhere. Don't mislead me into thinking

that I can talk sense into you.

I leaned my back on the wall, stumbling back onto the floor. Alice curled her lips, and returned to the bed.

30 minutes after Major left, the office doorbell rang. Running in was a pale faced Hiro, who appeared to have called many people downstairs—

“They didn’t return home last night.”

Upon hearing Hiro’s words, Alice turned around, frowning,

“…Who, you say?”

My scepticism sounded really stupid in this tense atmosphere of the detective agency, and Hiro raised a finger to point at the 7 youths on the monitors.

“I already checked with their parents. Those kids never contacted their parents, and they aren’t picking up their phones.”

After some clarifications, I learned that one of the R high school student’s mom was Hiro’s mistress. Hiro begged her to contact the parents of the history research club, originally intending to hear their whereabouts since the night on December 16. Unexpectedly, he found that the 4 club members and the 3 graduates, the ones we were investigating, did not return home since the previous night.

“Did the parents feedback to the school or call the police?”

“I heard that it isn’t the first time they went out all night without notifying their parents. Today’s a holiday too, so their parents aren’t too worried, it seems.”

Saying that, Hiro covered his mouth hard. I recalled the words Mori-san once said to me.

…We don’t have a place to go back to Those brats are the same. That’s why they can only wander the streets at night, and shoot us with the air guns…

However, the way the seven of them vanished at this time certainly wouldn’t be just high school kids going on a night outing.

I heard intensive typing on the keyboard, followed by a click of the tongue. Alice gave a grim look as she stared at the screen.

"…They switched off their cellphones, but if I can find one of them…"

"Their parents said that they couldn't obtain intel from the GPS." Hiro answered, "They probably switched off their phones to avoid letting their parents know where they are."

Alice nodded with a frozen look, and picked up the microphone.

"Tetsu? Where are you now? R-right…military shop 'Dragon Slayer' in Roppongi. Right, a shop Major used to frequent. You showed them the photos? They showed up? How many of them…4, got it. Did they say where they're headed? Really? Right, good work."

Alice hung up, and turned around to face us. The black silky hair fluttered for a moment, and landed again.

"We found their whereabouts at noon, and it looks they were at the Roppongi shop they usually visited. I heard there were only 4 real members, and they left some time after 2pm."

"Don't they have another gathering spot?" Hiro asked.

"The student in charge of leading everyone's called Kiriyama, the son of the Kiriyama Construction firm. Thus, they often play survival games at a building in Kita-Shinjuku built by the company, basically home court for the club. The other away courts are located in a shooting range located in Kanagawa, and an abandoned building in Saitama Major had told them about. However, I don't know where the building is located."

At this moment, a shrill electronic tone rang. There's a beeping from the monitor on the top left, and a messy wall of text appeared there.

"What…is this?"

"The hacking process. Finally got their position."

Alice shoved the side table with the keyboard over there.

"Where are they?" I leaned over at the bed.

"It's the SNS they often ue. They probably contact each other through a community site."

The monito showed the messages they left behind, and Alice

quickly scrolled down for the text log. Hiro and I stood by her, staring at the screen, and we inadvertently gasped.

“I heard that the police visited the shop.”

“What do we do? I already decided on the recommendation.”

“Hide the guns.”

“Shall we just surrender?”

“You go then.”

“Just push all the blame to Hira.”

“Hira won’t kill himself right now, right?”

“Push the blame to Hira”

“Tell Hira to hide the guns. Let him be bait.”

“Tomorrow? What time?”

“Anyway, remember to bring the guns. Don’t get caught.”

“Where are we going? Kiriyama building?”

“We can’t gather in the city now.”

“Saitama.”

“Send Hira a message that we’re gathering at Saitama.”

“Tell Hira to prepare batteries and food.”

The last line was sent last night at 9pm. After reading it, I felt a chill all over. Kill himself? Push the blame?

“…Who’s the Hira here?” Hiro muttered.

“Probably Hirabayashi Minoru. He’s the only one not in this chat.”

“This is bad.” Hiro’s voice was trembling. “They’re already cornered into despair.”

They want to push the guilt of killing Ginji-san to Hirabayashi alone, and force him into suicide. I couldn't help but shiver all over due to this overly direct thought process. Are you guys idiots? Do you think this kind of game can bluff the police? I'm going to stop them. There's still time, right? But where are they? In Saitama? If it is, it'll be the abandoned building Major informed them of, but where? Can't the location be more descriptive? I again read the text, and grabbed the side of the bed. Then, my fingertip touched something hard.

I looked down, and found a narrow and long shaped item placed in the gap between the bedsheets.

It's a ball-point pen.

This pen—I recalled that when Major just arrived, he pinched at the bed, probably around this area. Did he leave it here? Right when I was about to pick it up, I found it to be abnormally heavy. In the next moment I understood the real purpose of this ballpoint pen, and nearly exclaimed.

Why did Major come to the office? It wasn't just because he wanted to vent at Alice for hacking into his computer, but also **because he wanted us to experience the same thing**. I pondered hard, and gulped, before saying,

"Alice, about the Kiriyama Building that was just mentioned—"

Alice showed a look of surprise at my sudden question.

"I guess. It's probably the Kiriyama building in Shinjuku, right?"

"They'll **gather there**, right?"

Alice raised an eyebrow.

"What are you saying, Narumi, can't you see—"

I cut off her words, and quickly wrote words on my palm for her to see.

"Major is listening. Play along."

Alice's face instantly showed various expressions. I pointed at the ball-point, which was strangely heavy due to the battery, mic and signaller inside. She nodded immediately.

"…Right. It's near Shinjuku. You should hurry there."

I threw the pen onto the bed, and got up to run by Hiro, still unsure of what was going on, darting out of the corridor.

Deep down the roads from the Meiji Highway in Kita-Shinjuku was an area filled with lots of love hotels, and the Kiriyama Building was a seven storey office located in this area. There's no lighting in the building, and the sky just got dark, causing the building to basically the same color as the faint black sky. The display board of the building didn't have a company or shop name, and the glass windows forlornly reflected the neon lights of the hotels opposite.

I dumped my bicycle by the road devoid of crowds, and leaping over the bushes, I found a small figure standing at the corridor of the pitch black building like a stain. I pulled the automatic door that wouldn't move, and entered the hall. Even in the darkness, I could tell that it was Major from the silhouette. He noticed me too, put the goggles back onto his helmet, and said.

"…So I've been had by you, Vice-Admiral. I really underestimated you."

Major muttered, his face completely flushed. He probably ran all over the building, looking for the members. Of course, he won't be able to find them thanks to my plan."

"Those guys are in Saitama, probably…at the abandoned building you told them."

Only Major knew the exact location of this abandoned building, and though we could find it immediately, every second counts. Nobody knows what cornered kids will do, so I went the other way around to bluff Major into coming here. Good thing I made it here in time. The icy northern winds in the evening were really ripping my ears apart.

“You’re too naïve, Vice Admiral. You came alone. Even if I have to fight you, I’ll use the taser without hesitation.”

“Lead us to the abandoned building in Saitama right now.”

“Didn’t you hear what I said?”

“Who’s the one who didn’t hear? Those guys have guns with them. They’re in a state where they’re cornered and might do anything

now. What can you do by going alone!?”

I yelled back at Major, and at the same time, warned myself to remain calm. Major again pulled down his visor.

“I was the one who taught them how to modify guns illegally.”

Faced with Major’s confession, for a moment, I couldn’t say anything.

But thinking back about it, it wasn’t that strange. Major never had any ideals of obeying the law. He breaks the law in every way, whether it’s making his own transmitters, grenades, or amplifying the power of a taser, even modifying air guns wouldn’t be beneath him.

“Do you understand? I taught them not to give any regard to the laws of this country, and saddled them with the rule of not attacking non-combatants. Who’s willing to hear out such words? It’s all idealistic from me. Nobody listens. This ends up happening. Ginji-san’s basically killed because of me.”

“So…so what?”

Step by step, I approached Major.

“You say that you want to settle things on your own, but you’re just trying to satisfy yourself here.”

At that moment, Major’s right hand flashed. I barely managed to grab his arm, and pulled it before my eyes. Sparks flew from the taser, several centimeters before me. I shivered. Major was for real, not intending to hold back.

“I intend to deal with this alone. What’s wrong about this? If I can’t do this, I won’t be able to forgive myself.”

Major exerted more force in his hand, and the tips of the taser trembled before us.

“Besides—”

I could no longer hold my emotions in.

“You wouldn’t forgive yourself anyway!”

“Ginji-san is already dead, and he won’t come back. Even if you kill

those kids or force them to surrender, you'll just be burdened with the guilt of killing someone. Why don't you understand this?"

Major's face got twisted, his lips caused out. He agitatedly said some really blood curlding things.

"But even so, those of the same kind should deal with kids who pretend to be soldiers! If I don't do this, I will—never ever be able to enjoy holding guns, memorize model numbers, wear camouflage suits or smell gunpowder."

Under the thick lens of the goggles, Major's eyes were on the verge of breaking into tears. The brat pretending to be soldiers had fragile pride left, almost unable to support his small body. However, the enhanced grip on my arm was about to break it.

"Who's the one who intend to tase to death now!?"

I yelled at the goggles."

"**What do you call me every time?** You tell me!"

Major looked somewhat perturbed, and the force pushing at my hand weakened slightly.

"Don't you dare say that you forgot! I'm one of the brats who played soldier with you, a useless commander! Didn't you call me that yourself!?"

The taser dropped onto the floor, letting out a shrill sound.

For a moment, I thought the goggles were snapped by the grip, only to realize it was just my imagination. Major merely pushed me aside, and I could only watch him kneel down to pick up the gun. I started to shiver, my body seemingly sensing a cold.

Why was I saying such useless retorts? Was that any difference from Major's stupid pride? I can't complain even if I'm attacked with several million volts.

However, Major kept his head lowered as he held the taser, remaining slightly. I couldn't endure this silence that was crushing my heart, and spoke up.

"…I'm coming even if you tell me not to."

"What's the point of you coming then, Vice Admiral? You won't be

of any use.” Major sighed. He’s right; I’m just a detective assistant. I don’t know how to wield a gun.

Major walked by me, and pulled hard at the automatic door. The frosty air blew into the hall, and I got up to give chase after the small figure in camouflage suit.

He stopped, turned around to look, still holding the taser.

The goggles reflected the light from the streets, and I couldn’t see his expression. The tightly curled lips gave me a feeling that there was nothing more we could talk about.

The same thing repeating again? Communication failed, and violence again isolated us.

Major knelt down, stuffing the taser into the holster. I saw that Major didn’t want to use violence on me, and him ignoring me was despair for me. I could only feel a chill.

But at this moment—

A strong light appeared beside Major and me. At the same time, there were the sounds of some engines and braking. Major covered his eyes with his hands, and turned to the land leading towards the Meiji Highway. 3 heavy looking vehicles came out from the dark alley, and the first one was parked right before me. The tall, massive figure got out from the co-passenger seat, blocking the car headlights, his completely bleached hair and hem of his crimson jacket were fluttering under the backlight.

“Are you done with punching each other out now?” Yondaime asked. “If you haven’t, get punching. My subordinates are all so bloodthirsty it’s noisy bringing them around. On to Saitama!”

“Aniki!”

“Aniki! Good work!”

The Hirasaka-gumi members got out from the wagon cars one after another. Everyone looked really massive because they were wearing double jackets and not the usual black T-shirts.

“Stop yapping away and order that shorty of a commander.”

Yondaime spat. I merely bit my lips and lowered my head. If I was

careless with my words, I might really cry. Again, I faced him, but he remained knelt down. The goggles reflecting the light also meant that I wasn't able to see his expression clearly. I guess he too was like me, trying his best to contain his feelings.

"This is an order from the Vice Admiral to the Major. Lead 20 reinforcement soldiers to the frontlines ASAP."

"You got to be kidding." Major's voice was quivering. "The bullets are metallic. If they're to charge without any equipment…"

"We all got full face helmets ready."

Yondaime answered without waiting for Major to finish. At this moment, I realized that all the members had motorcycle helmets tucked under their armpit. I gulped stiffly; I never thought of preparing such things. Really, Yondaime's a lot smarter than me, and as Major said, I alone won't be of any use.

But it doesn't matter for me. I'm the detective assistant. It's my job to get everyone involved.

I heard a few blunt sounds, and found Major smacking his thigh with his fist. Only on the 6th hit did he finally stand up.

His eyes were glittering with moisture under the visor.

And after exhaling some white breath, he commanded,

"—I'll drive the first car! Everyone, follow me. If you're late, it'll be 200 push-ups!"

The abandoned building in Saitama was an old folks home that was halfway built, and as it was located near to the highway, it became a spot for supernatural hunting. However, as the interior furbishing was really bland, the trend faded after a while. Major spotted this place right after he graduated from high school.

"There's a security system I set up near the highway back in the day. Those guys might have noticed us by now."

Major got off the driver seat of the wagon car, and said this to Yondaime in the second car.

The exhaust sounds from the vehicles moving down the highway

seemed so far away from us at this point. Right beside us was a forest as black as the dark night, and as we walked down the wide path tiled with cobble, we spotted a darker shadow. I guess it's because we're in the hills that I could feel the air and cold on the skin and losing as compared to when I'm in Tokyo.

I looked at the cellphone, and affirmed that it was almost 6. Also, I found that Alice had been trying to contact me for quite a while. I hadn't noticed them till this point.

"There's no need for you to go too! You'll just get in their way!"

"What if a bullet hits you in the eye? Just leave everything to Major and Yondaime. Come back."

I heard almost half of the voicemails Alice left me, and closed the phone before anyone realized. How could I possibly back away at this point. I was the one who riled everyone up.

Yondaime got out from the driver seat of the second driver seat, and asked Major,

"Are those brats really inside?"

Major took out a pair of night vision goggles, and stared at the stone road in front of him. Looking on from it, it appeared the old folks home was like a stream stopping under the night sky, devoid of any light. However, Major kept his goggles, saying,

"They're here, and it's not just one of them. No doubts. They aren't using any lighting at all, but they do use heaters."

I got off from the co-passenger seat, and heard the footsteps of the Hirasaka-gumi on the stone path that sounded like an afternoon rain. Looking back, I found that everyone already had their helmets on. These guys look like an army able to reduce a town of 2,000 people to nothing in less than an hour, really terrifying.

"Been a while since we struck first!"

"I'm shaking with excitement." "Aniki has been settling everything with his mouth recently!"

"Can we beat them to near death?"

Everyone's voices was contained in the helmet, and the conversation got more intense.

"I'll say to everyone first."

Major stood in front of this helmet squad, and spoke clearly,

"As much as you can, do not hurt the enemy."

"Are you kidding?" "Who's able to do that?" "We came here to beat people up!"

"Quiet! This is an order! If you can't do it, you aren't a soldier, and you should go home now!"

"Hey!" "Who has to listen to your orders!"

"Aniki is the one who ordered us. We're all elite soldiers!"

"Do you know how much we outrank a Major?" You guys are 8 ranks below him…

"An-anyway." Unable to take this anymore, I decided to speak up, "Everyone, obey Major today."

"Right!" "If you say so, aniki!" "We'll leave our lives to you!"

"Quiet, get moving. If we waste more time, that Hirabayashi brat might really get killed."

Yondaime quietly commanded, put on his goggles, and walked towards the stone path. The Hirasaka-gumi members and Major too gave pursuit in a rush.

"Listen up, when I say get down, lie down on the floor. Anyone shooting at us, hide behind cover, and if you can't, move side to side towards the enemy…"

Major advanced along Yondaime as he explained to the Hirasaka-gumi members. At this moment, my gut seemed to wince for some reason. However, I could only pull down the goggles I borrowed from Major, pull my knit cap down to my eyes, and be at the back of the group.

I kept checking the taser in the pocket of my coat; it was an enhanced modified weapon Major lent me, but to be honest, I really didn't want to end up using it.

“Just follow behind us, aniki.”

The gang walking in front of me said to me,

“Just 5-6 brats playing with air guns. We’ll handle them quick.”

But despite hearing this, I felt an inexplicable sense of uneasiness.

We walked out of the forest, and saw the ominous silhouette of the old folks home. In fact, it was the front side that was built into a building, and the back area was still mostly steel frames, as though there were numerous crosses under the night sky.

Right at the top of the corridor was a tall second level without any glass panes installed, and I could see that one window as lit, while the other was dark. Major quickly reacted like lightning, and immediately took out a miniature launcher before firing it at the window. Flames were ignited from the launcher, and the bright tail from the shot flew into the window. At the next moment, a loud boom and bright lights, followed by the sound out many birds flapping their wings, flying out from the surrounding forest. It was a stun grenade fired by Major.

“Mukai Hitoshi. Surrender now.”

Major’s voice echoed all around. The Hirasaka-gumi led by Yondaime went past Major, and charged into the corridor.

“Watch the stairs. 8 of you go up! Don’t leave the walls!”

Yondaime’s voice rang by my ears, and numerous flashes and footsteps crossed each other. After a while, there was a groaning voice coming from the second floor.

“—yo…” “…gah!”

I cautiously entered the corridor, unable to see clearly in the darkness, and all I could see were the plain decorations on the concrete walls and ceiling. The long, narrow windows didn’t have any glass windows installed, so the place was as cold as it was outside. The floor too had a thick layer of wilted leaves and dust.

“The room at the corner of the U-shaped corridor on the second floor is sheltered from the wind. They’re probably hiding there.”

Major turned around to say as he climbed up the stairs. Yondaime

nodded, and began scaling the stairs. He was only wearing a pair of goggles, and I could not help but worry for him. I knew that he hated having his vision and voice blocked, but he didn't have to be the first one in at this moment!"

"Don't underestimate us!"

"You brats!!"

Again, the growls of the Hirasaka-gumi members could be heard right before the stairs, with some weak sobbing mixed in. I shrank my neck back in, and was the last to climb the stairs.

The surrounding darkness everywhere meant that I couldn't determine the structure, but it seemed this place was a wide lobby. It's probably an elevator hall, I guess. Looking down from the windows, I could see a massive atrium before the main corridor, and there were a few hulks there wearing full face helmets. Through some light from the flashlight in my hand, I could barely something twitching under their feet.

"What are you doing? Seriously, what are you doing?"

"Ow ow ow, stop trampling! Ugh! Please! Stop stepping on us!"

Two young men were trampled under the feet of the Hirasaka-gumi members, their camouflage jackets making them look as though they had swelled in size. I shone my flashlight on their faces, and found one of the history research club members I met at R high school.

"How many of them left?" "Where are they?"

The duo was unable to answer the questions in the face of these face creaking voices. The guns fell by their sides, but there was no gunshot to be heard. Even for students who often played survival games, they wouldn't be able to react calmly when suddenly attacked by a stun grenade and a squad thrashing them.

Suddenly, I heard a loud bang from behind, and I turned around to find a flash deep down the corridor. Yondaime kicked down a door, and a whole squad of people in helmets roared and rushed in. At this moment, a soft metallic sound could be heard in my consciousness. It was a little different from the BB bullet sound I heard before, and the hard bullet hit the concrete wall and ceiling, bouncing off them.

I leaned my back on the wall and advanced deep into the corridor, peeking in at the devastation in the room through the damaged door. There's a lantern and something glowing red, probably an electric heart. I couldn't tell whether the ones rolling on the floor in the darkness were the Hirasaka-gumi members or the ones in camouflage. A terrifyingly soft gunshot rang again, and I hurriedly retreated.

"Damn it damn it damn it, just die already, all of you!"

I could hear a boy yelling in madness. I remembered hearing this voice before, it's the leader Kiriyama.

"Surround him!" "Take his legs out!" "You guys are willing to attack your allies too? Calm down!"

The Hirasaka-gumi members hollered.

The gunshots finally stopped, and with bated breath, I covered my head before entering the room again.

The room was a lot spacious than I imagined, and there's a sweet, rotting stench coming from the trash at the wall. The wall had a human shape and a bullseye target spray painted onto it, with hundreds of holes due to the bullet marks. Kiriyama's back was against the wall, holding the airgun firmly. The remaining trio were struggling on the floor, held down by the Hirasaka-gumi members.

"Don't come near me, you bastards, or I'll shoot!"

Kiriyama's gun was pointed right at the back of the crimson jacket with the dragon patterns.

"Souichirou, don't be reckless!"

Major shouted from the other end of the room. However, Yondaime approached Kiriyama. It was obvious the latter was increasingly nervous as he raised the gun.

"Ahhhh!"

Kiriyama let out an ear-piercing shriek, and Yondaime immediately swung his arm. The red jacket flew in the face of the fully automatic fire, and I could only widen my eyes and gulp. However, Yondaime had already vanished, leaving only the jacket on the floor. At the same time, he had already ducked past the fire, and

landed a punch on Kiriyama.

Kiriyama fell to the floor, rolling in pain. Yondaime grabbed him by the parka collar, and asked,

“Don’t you dare go to sleep now. Where’s Hirabayashi?”

“…Ah, gak…ugh.”

Kiriyama was choking really hard, gastric juices mixed with his saliva as they flowed out from his mouth. It’s not unexpected that he wouldn’t be able to talk after taking a punch in the gut from Hinamura Souichirou, who’s able to dent a metal block. However, Yondaime didn’t care as he pressed Hirayama’s head down onto the floor, speaking with a more heinous tone.

“I’m asking you where Hirabayashi is. If you’re not going to talk, I’m going to snap your fingers one by one.”

I shivered in shock due to Yondaime’s threat. Sometimes, I would forget that he’s dakudou thorough and through.

“Souichirou, don’t hurt him.”

“Shut up.” Yondaime glared over his shoulder at Major. He grabbed Kiriyama firmly by the arm again, and the latter couldn’t help but scream in pain,

“…Ro-ro-roof! He’s on the roof!”

Another one right under Pole’s feet said sobbingly,

“Hira? He-he’s on the roof. We didn’t do anything. He ran up there.”

Upon hearing this, Major went running to the roof immediately.

I ran up the stairs, pushed aside the door leading to the roof, and heard a sharp sound from the concrete below me. The reflected bullets grazed by my cheeks, and I could feel warm liquid oozing out. I held the handle, lowered my body, and got up to the roof. My injured cheek was pricking in pain due to the icy feeling.

There was no shelter on the roof, only a wide night sky. The concrete extended everywhere, striking an abrupt boundary in the

distance. The Northern winds were howling at the trees, forming swaying shadows. I stared intently in the darkness, looking around. There was only a low chest-level wall, without a fence.

I walk out of the door, and looked to the right, and found Major's little body there. He wasn't moving, and due to the strong Northern breeze, the short hair on the back of his hair and the helmet strap were swaying.

"…Why are you here?"

There was a young voice from the silent darkness opposite us, almost overpowered by the sound of the wind. I started looking from behind Major, began seeking in the darkness, and found another little figure from the wall opposite.

"What do you mean? What exactly do you mean? You came here. I told you not to bother about me!"

It was Hirabayashi. The one wailing was Hirabayashi. His little body was dressed in a deep blue duffle coat that was flapping strongly in the Northern winds, looking as though he would be blown up into the sky. I guess he never went home after school yesterday, and was dragged all the way here.

But—

If that was the case, why was he aiming the assault rifle at Major?

"Go back! This has nothing to do with you, senpai!"

Hirabayashi sounded as so he was on the verge of tears.

"How does it have nothing to do with me? My own squad broke the roles, and the commander has to take responsibility. I'm just fulfilling the responsibility I should be showing."

"Shut up! I don't want to play this soldier game anymore!"

Major continued to approach, one step after another.

"right. This is a military game. Kiriyama and the others aren't playing a fun game anymore. That's why I'm here to guide everyone back."

"Don't act as if you know anything. You don't!"

“I do! I saw their SNS chat group. They wanted to push the blame to you!”

“But I did shoot back then.”

Major stopped, and I, who was approaching as well, stopped in my tracks. The strong winds blew at us, and I, stumbling away, could only lean to the short wall by the side.

“You lent me a gun, senpai—so-so I fired. When I shot with the normal BB bullets, I couldn’t even hit anything. Kiriyama-san said that I wouldn’t be able to hit anything even with metal bullets, and so the 5 of us shot at that old man together—”

I grabbed the rough, thin and long handrail of the wall, barely holding myself from nearly falling over. Tears and winds practically covered over Hirabayashi’s voice.

“We aimed at his ears and eyes, and practically hit them all. We watched him bleed out on the night vision goggles.”

There was clattering in Hirabayashi’s voice, and I realized that it was his teeth trembling. The gun pointed at Major was shaking heavily too.

“So-so it’s pointless for you to come here too, senpai!”

Pointless. The word echoed emptily in the darkness.

What was Major’s expression at this point? What feelings did he have as he went forward?

“Don’t come over! I’ll shoot!” He said.

“So what?”

Major stopped a few steps away from Hirabayashi, and asked,

“And why did you come here?”

“How would I know?” Hirabarayashi was already breaking down in tears. “Kiriyama-san said that everyone was to get to together and deal with the guns—but when I came here, nobody was talking. They were just shooting at wild dogs to pass the time…”

Because they couldn’t do anything. The brats who committed a crime of murder had no ideas. The result of them running away was

the roof as the Northern winds howled.

“So what? Are you going to jump off here?”

Major coldly asked, and Hirabayashi’s throat trembled.

Numerous footsteps could be heard behind us. The gang in helmets slammed the roof door violently, and dashed out. Yondaime broke out from the terrifying gang, glanced aside at Major, me and Hirabayashi in turn, and immediately raised his hand to stop the gang from moving.

“Do-don’t come near me! If you do, I’ll really shoot! I killed the old man; of course I’ll kill you!”

“Shoot it then.” Major said.

I gasped. Major took off the helmet, and tossed his goggles aside. The soft natural hair fluttered in the night breeze.

“I’m a Major, a combatant. I came here today, prepared to die, so if you want to shoot, shoot it. Then you’ll get back your honor as a soldier, and if you want to jump after that, do it.”

“Wh-what are you saying? I don’t understand!”

“Hey Major.” Yondaime kept his voice down, “Stop playing around. That brat’s cornered already. He’ll really shoot.”

“I said it’s fine.”

“Major—”

I spoke up without knowing what I wanted to say, and Major, with his back turned on me, raised his hand, saying,

“Vice-Admiral, we’ll meet at Yasukuni!”

Again, Major took a step forward.

“What do you mean? What do you mean!?”

A teary voice echoed in the wind,

“Stop. Don’t come here. Stop, stop, I’m sorry, I’m sorry I’m sorry.”

Hirabayashi’s voice started to have some madness mixed in. He

continued to aim the gun at Major's chest as he backed himself against the wall. I could even see that he was exerting strength on the trigger. A chill surrounded me, and this was the worst possible outcome. *These guys are all idiots. If they want to die, they can die alone for all I care. If this guy shoots now, Major will have his brains blown out, and he'll fall because of the recoil. It's all because Major insisted on his own stupid pride that things turned out into this unsalvageable mess. If that guy's the only one able to save himself, we can only laugh at this. Of course, we know very well that if someone jumps off the roof of a three level building, God will enact his cruel stubbornness, and result in the worst possible outcome. Damn brat, you can land on the hard asphalt and die all you want.* and an evil feeling repeated itself in my consciousness.

But the moment Major took off his camouflage jacket and stepped forward again, my consciousness of madness started to break. *No, wait! What am I doing! I can't let them die, not like this. Why did I come here?*

My right hand subconsciously touched the pocket of my coat, and my left hand held firmly onto the short wall. The railing was made of two long and thin metal rods.

Two long and thin rods that goes around the entire roof—

"Don't come near me!"

Hirabayashi screamed, and the trembling gun calmed down at that moment.

An electric current flowed through my hand. I took out the taser from my pocket, stabbed the two electrodes at the two metal rods, and pressed the witch.

I couldn't see any sparks, nor hear any discharge.

Only the button in my hand let out a click.

At the far end of the roof, the little body in dark blue duffle coat jumped up, and fell. The rifle too slipped from his hands. Major got up from the concrete, leaned over, and grabbed Hirabayashi by the arm as the latter was falling off, immediately pulling him back.

The rifle landed on the concrete floor, giving off a hollow sound.

Hirabayashi's little body fell by Major's feet, and the sound of the

breeze swept at the intensely rising dust.

Another sharp sound rang by my ears; it turned out to be the taser falling out from my hands. After a while, I realized it.

The Northern winds got increasingly stronger, and the rustling of the forest got louder.

The helmet team led by Yondaime approached Major like a team sending off someone on a funeral. I wasn't the one who got electrocuted, but my legs were shaking.

I head a sobbing voice echo with the wind.

It's over, I thought.

I held onto the handrail, collapsing over at the wall.

Everything was over. The Hirasaka-gumi led by Major went on a suppression operation, and achieved complete victory, which is something to be happy over. However, I didn't have the strength to stand up. Why exactly was that? For whose sake, and why, did we do such a stupid thing? For Major's stupid insistence on his pride? Or for the sake of getting the brats who shot at the homeless with airguns for fun? Why couldn't we just leave everything to the police? It doesn't matter to me how ugly their deaths will be.

Hot air was oozing from my ears, landing on my neck. My head gradually got clearer.

I remembered my job; being a detective assistant.

I didn't come here for anyone else, but for—

Suddenly, I heard the door open.

"—Narumi!"

The long black hair fluttered around, and the girl ran through the Northern breeze, calling for me. It's Alice, it's really her. She, dressed in a coat over her pajamas, frantically ran towards me. It felt so surreal, I was a little dizzy. Was I dreaming?

"Narumi, y-you!"

Alice's petite body leapt into my arms, and I could feel her warmth. She knelt down, her knees basically touching mine as she kept

caressing my neck and face. Once she found that I had a graze due to a reflected bullet, she turned pale.

“Didn’t I tell you already, you idiot!? You should leave such gruff work to the gorillas, Major or Yondaime!”

“Wait, Alice, it hurts! I just have a cut. Don’t touch it.”

“I called you about 300 times or so, and you ignored them all!”

She noticed the footsteps behind her, her hand jolted upright in fear, and she hurriedly turned around.

“…Ahh, nee-san, good job.”

“Good job.”

Turned out it was the Hirasaka-gumi members, who were still wearing helmets from some reason. Alice was obviously terrified, and hurriedly hugged me.

Yondaime walked out from the ferocious crowd, his coat was tattered by the bullets during the last battle, and he looked cold wearing only a shirt on top.

“You showed up again.” Yondaime frowned, “Why did you come here? You too, Hiro. Don’t drive all the way here just because Alice begged you.”

Yondaime looked back at the door leading to the roof, and I realized that there was Hiro at the stairs, giving a wry smile. So Alice too Hiro’s car here.

“She was on the verge of tears because she couldn’t contact Narumi-san, and I can’t refuse her.”

“Who was crying?”

Alice stood up, and lashed out angrily.

“I didn’t come here for Narumi! Wh-why do you think I came all the way here into the hills?”

“…For a test of courage?”

“If you’re serious, I’m going to fire you right now!”

“Just joking, sorry.”

The commotion that occurred on the barren rooftop again vanished in the winds.

A rustling sound rang by my ears, and it seemed somebody was dragging something here.

A path opened in the human wall of helmets behind Alice, and appearing in front of me was an elementary school-like boy, not wearing a helmet, goggles, or a camouflage jacket. He was dragging a corpse by the collar of the deep blue duffle coat.

No—that wasn’t a corpse. Hirabayashi Minoru was still alive. His eyes remained lifeless, and there was traces of dried spit at his mouth, but he was still alive.

Major dragged Hirabayashi before Alice, and spoke with a worn out voice,

“…Detective time next. Do whatever you want.”

Hirabayashi’s dirty eyes were twitching, and Alice gasped in shock, grabbing the sleeve of my coat. I stood up to support her.

Of course, Alice came here to investigate. She came all the way to this dried up battlefield, where nobody won, for despite it going to dirty her hands, she wanted to personally dig up the truth.

“Hirabayashi Minoru. Stand up.”

Hirabayashi’s eyelids twitched a few times due to Alice’s call, his eyes, sunk in the world of death, flickered sceptically.

“…Who…are you?”

A cracking voice oozed out from his lips.

“I’m the NEET detective, speaker of the dead. That’s not the name I should be saying to you, so you can forget about it. Once you reveal the truth, I will have no interest in you, and you can spend the rest of your life repenting, regretting, escaping or despairing.”

Alice’s tone was so cold, the air could be heard compressing, and she focused on Hirabayashi’s eyes.

“…W…wh-what…?”

“I just want to ask you something.”

Alice coldly cut off his words.

“That night, you shot at the homeless with a modified gun, right? **Did the old man wear a muffler back then**?”

A chill ran from my arms to my neck. I stared at the aloof sidelong face of Alice, and Yondaime too stared at Alice with widened eyes. I guess Hiro too was the same.

Wear—the muffler?

The deep blue duffle coat at my feet twitched, and the parched lips tried their best to answer,

“…He…did. But, why…”

“I understand.”

The black hair covered my vision, and Alice turned to the door leading to the stairs.

“Let’s go, Narumi. Everything is solved.”

A breath was caught in my throat, and I, without thinking, let out all scepticism in one exhale.

“Wait, Alice, is this really fine? What do you mean?”

I grabbed her by the shoulder, and stared at her face,

“Didn’t we come here to investigate why they had to chop the head off, or how they did it?”

Alice merely lowered her eyes, and the duffle coat at my feet started to rub against the concrete floor.

“…Head…?”

Hirabayashi’s groan caused me to turn around and look at him in shock, my eyes meeting his corroded ones.

“…What…about…the head…? …Chopped off…?”

I widened my eyes, and felt queasy, as though thousands of worms

were crawling all over me. What's going on? Didn't you guys do it? Didn't you guys kill Ginji-san? If—

Suddenly, someone grabbed my arm. I turned my head around, and met a pair of eyes filled with the starry night. Alice was staring at my eyes, and shook her head.

"So I say, the head wasn't chopped off by them. We're done here, so let's go."

But despite Alice saying this, I couldn't move at all. Or to be precise, nobody except for Alice could move. She lowered her eyes, and seemed to have given up on us as she turned around, and walked towards the door alone.

Chapter 6

The starless night sky had the color of a TV switched off.

The lights shining through the windows of the buildings, the neon LED lights on the trees planted on the pedestrian pathway, and the vehicle headlights packed in front of the station; these corrosive lights shone upon the sky from the ground. A singing voice with bell chimes could be heard from somewhere, and it was the Christmas song I had heard a few times this Winter.

However, there was a river of darkness splitting us from the world of light, and that was the railway.

“This isn’t bad.”

Alice grabbed at the hem of my coat, and muttered as she stared opposite the track.

“How pretty. It really is appropriate to dub this the Holy Night. This name has broken free from many beliefs, merely retaining its actual name. I do feel this name really signifies the nature of the night of December 24th.”

“Nature?” I asked Alice. I thought that she, so familiar with the Bible, would mock the Japanese for their partying during the Holy Night, so such comments surprised me.

“Don’t you know that Christmas Day actually has no relevance to Christ himself?”

“Ah…I think I heard of it.”

“There are many speculations as to why Christ’s birthday was set as the 25th of December. One of it was that the Christians during the Roman Empire wanted to attract the worshippers of Mithra, god of light, and set their day of worship as Christ’s birthday instead. In any case, Christmas is already a Winter Solstice Festival, the original holiday for the Northern Hemisphere’s farmers to devote their offerings.”

“So it’s the same as the Labor Thanksgiving Day.”

“More or less.”

Alice raised the doll in her clutches, and said with a faint smile,

“The sun that graces the land for a year dies on this day, and a new sun is born on the following day, so this is a day celebrating death and revival. There’s no need for the Father, Son, Holy Ghost, Divine Mothers, three Magi of the east, and the pitiful aliens getting involved in some galactic explosion far above the skies of Bethlehem; this night itself is already sacred. Us atheists can just party as we please.”

“I see.”

Alice’s words throbbed at my parched soul, causing it to echo somewhat.

This was really strange. Just 20 hours and so, I was involved in a gun fight, and now I’m together with Alice, staring at the streets of the Christmas Eve. Her voice just lacked a sense of reality for a while, probably because of the black veil. She, dressed in mourning clothes, had half of her body in the world of death.

It was the time when the detective was dressed in mourning clothes.

This was an indication that it was the moment to dig up the dead’s grave, and to make up and explain with the shame and pain of the living. This indicated the end of the incident, a festival of death and revival. Even though it was a miracle, nobody hoped for it, and nobody discovered it.

Alice held my hand, and walked on. There was a flight of stairs on the uphill slope to the left side of the pedestrian pathway, and we climbed it together, ducked under the yellow cordon tape, and entered the dark park. It seemed the time in the park had stopped, and everything was frozen. This included the forests devoid of light, the street lamps that were extinguished, the tents occupying the darkness, the barren grasslands, the bare sandy ground, and the blood trails on the metal board.

Alice stood on it, staring at the ominous black figure spreading below her feet. I tried my best to recall the sight of Ginji-san who collapsed here, but I couldn’t. My memory was the product of something already bleached by the many things that occurred.

“I checked the surveillance visuals with you.”

Alice stared at the blood, and muttered.

“We know that there wasn’t a tool that could chop off a human head being moved in and out of the park. Katsuragi Kenji was still alive when he returned to the park.”

I nodded.

“In that case, Katsuragi Kenji was beheaded in this park, and the tool is now in this park.”

“…Where?’

I gulped, and looked around in the darkness.

Alice merely pointed below us.

“This metal sheet used for construction is used as a guillotine blade, so nobody else found out. The bladed part that beheaded should have some blood left behind, but this time, the blade is where the corpse fell on, so the truth was hidden in this fact.”

I was left speechless, and looked back and forth between the blood and Alice’s face.

“N-no, what are you saying? Using the metal sheet as a blade? How many kilograms do you think this is?”

“Given the size of this thing, I guess it’s probably around 200kg or so.”

“200kg? How is it possible to lift such a heavy thing for a guillotine? It’s impossible!”

“And I never said that it was lifted by head. I said that it’s a guillotine. Look.”

Alice backed away from me and walked away from the metal sheet. There’s a little H-shaped ditch, something I found when I came to investigate with Alice.

“What…is this?”

“The matching marks should be on the other side, under the metal sheet.”

“So what’s going on?”

“These are marks of a guillotine pillar.”

“Pillar? Where—”

Startled, I shut up. I could see metal wires through the gap in the forest behind Alice. Right behind the metal fence was the railway.

During that time, Alice found a hole just large enough for someone to put an arm through the metal fence, and on the other side of the hole was an abandoned rail.

The rails were the long and narrow metallic pillars with sawed off H-shape protrusions.

“Yes, thsee rails can be used as a pillar for a blade to slide down.”

With an anguished voice, Alice said, and looked down again.

“The edges of the metal plate have holes to hook onto and move it, and they probably put some rope in through them.”

Erect a rail, fasten the metal plate between the rails, raise a metal sheet from both sides, place a corpse right below it, let go of it, and a blade 200kg heavy will slide down several meters.

“Alice, wait.”

I could not stop myself form shivering, and grabbed my shoulders, eking out a voice, asking,

“I understand—what you’re getting it, but to do this…”

Alice raised her hand to cut me off. At wherever she was pointing it, behind my shoulder, there were footsteps to be heard stepping on wilted grass.

I turned around, and found the person making this sound slowly move from the darkness into this dim light. I let out a dry breath, and saw Mori-san with some band-aids on his bald hand, his oil-stained down jacket was buttoned firmly, and a little bag tucked under his armpit.

“…Yo, Narumi. And then, erm.”

Mori-san turned his eyes towards Alice, who was behind me.

“Nice to meet you. I am the NEET detective, speaker of the dead.”

Alice answered with a really tender voice. Mori-san curled his lips,

and nodded,

“Well, Tetsu and the others did mention this, but I never thought I would meet the real one—ah, no.”

Mori-san shrank back due to the cold, and scanned the dark park. At this place, both the lights in the sky and above the ground were too distant.

“Actually, I did feel that someone was already waiting was waiting for me.”

Alice stepped forward beside me, close enough for me to feel her warmth, and again grabbed my coat.

“I want to be sure of one thing.”

“What is it?” Mori-san muttered.

“For the rope, did you use vinyl string for it?”

“Yeah. There’s a whole pile of them left in Ginji-san’s hut. Rope made of vinyl strings are rather sturdy.”

Mori-san’s explanation stabbed right at my chest.

“So it was you, Mori-san.”

I could no longer say anything. If it were as Alice had said, the culprit behind this was not just a single person, and not Mori-san alone. There had to be two people to lift the railways, 2, or even 4 people to pull the rope, and someone to bring Ginji-san’s corpse to hold behind at the bottom of the blade—

“Yes. This is the answer, Narumi.”

Alice placed her hand on my back.

The ones who chopped off Ginji-san’s head were the homeless who gathered that morning, Ginji-san’s friends. How? How’s that possible?

“But isn’t that strange? If that’s the case, Major should have seen what happened, right? He’s the first one to arrive, but when he arrived, he said that the corpse was already beheaded.”

I really wanted to take back what I just said.

Was Major an accomplice too? Did he participate in the beheading?

Alice lifted her head at me, and shook it.

“Major did lie. This lie caused us to make a a decisive, basic error. However, his lie was not what you think.”

“Then…then, what is it?”

“Major wasn’t the first to discover the corpse.”

I stared at Alice’s lips, reflecting on what she meant.

“The first one to appear at the park in the visual at 4.30am wasn’t Major.”

“That will be me.”

Mori-san said.

“I was the first to find out, and call Major.”

I stared at Mori-san’s face. So the order was reversed. It wasn’t that Major notified Mori-san and the others. Major received Mori-san’s call, and contacted me immediately. Before he could enter the park, Mori-san and the others had let down the guillotine blade.

“When Major arrived…we have completed everything.”

“In that case—at the very least, Major lied to hide the crime Mori-san and the others did. Isn’t he an accomplice here?”

I muttered, and Alice shook her head.

“You’re wrong. Don’t you understand? Major took fingerprints and bullets from Katsuragi Kenji’s corpse right in front of them. If the police asked, and he answered honestly, what will happen?”

“Ah…”

“That’s why he lied, saying that he came first, before the homeless friends did.”

Alice looked down at the blood at the feet, and continued muttering,

“Major doesn’t know the truth behind the beheading, so this lie has

no significance. He just made a little lie because he didn't want his friends to be harassed by the police."

But it was because of this lie that hid the truth. Alice added on with an almost inaudible voice. I bit my lower lip, suppressing this feeling of disgust, and turned towards Mori-san.

"Why…why? Why did you, and everyone too? Why did everyone chop off Ginji-san's head? Were you lying to me? Why did you do such a thing?"

Mori-san's face remained frozen, and he looked away from me, remaining silent.

"Because this is his wish."

Alice's frosty voice rang beside my ear, and I stared at her face in disbelief.

"…Eh?"

"This is Katsuragi Kenji's wish, and his friends simply fulfilled that wish."

"W-what? His own wish? The head—like that?"

"Think about it. Didn't you see the corpse for yourself? His hands were holding onto his muffler, right?

Because of Alice's words, that blood-curdling, freezing sight that morning that looked so surreal, devoid of all color, and something I didn't want to recall became more striking.

"Ah…"

Right. It's true that the hands of the decapitated body were holding onto the muffler. The memory unlocked more memories, linking them together. This was the final question Alice asked at the roof of the pitch black abandoned building. She said she just wanted to know something, and for the sake of knowing this answer, she became antagonistic towards Major, and sullied his honor as a soldier.

Was Katsuragi Kenji wearing a muffler?

Ginji-san—removed his own muffler, and made it easier to chop his head off? I shivered at this terrifying notion, and it felt as though I

found my body was amputated and replaced with crude concrete.

Then Ginji-san's head—

"I put it in this bag."

Mori-san spoke with a terse voice.

"Even when we're holding dirty bags, nobody will pay us any mind, or rather, I should say that nobody will care about…"

The final words vanished from Mori-san's mouth.

"So you cremated him at the incinerator at your workplace or somewhere?'

Mori-san lifted his head upon hearing Alice's question. His eyes sparkled in the darkness.

"…You really do know everything. It's really terrifying…I took it to the rubbish incinerator of the reclamation plant. It took me about a week."

Mori-san lowered his head as he looked at the bag under his armpit. That was—the ashes of Ginji-san.

"So you have already completed your duty."

Why did Alice sound so kind that her words were about to melt?

"You cut the head off, hid it, and waited until the Holy Night to to bring it here and fulfil the wish. Is that correct?"

Mori-san gently hugged the bag with both hands, and stared at it.

"Right. I don't know whether he'll be happy or not. When I found him on that day, he was a lost cause. He had an eye beaten out, holes on his neck, and he was bleeding…he was still able to say this much…"

I really wanted to cover my eyes, and kept shaking my head, not knowing what I was trying to deny. Why did he leave a dying message in such a situation? And to cut off the head too. There's probably more important things to talk about, right?

"…So I say, why?"

Disgust and a groan leaked out from my throat.

“Why did Ginji-san want to this?”

“So then, Narumi, what do you think will happen when a headless corpse is found.”

Something that will happen because of such an incident?

I scanned the dark park that was only filled with the presence of death.

A strange corpse would cause the park to be closed, the reconstruction delayed, and Ginji-san’s hut to be protected.

His house still remains in the park.

“Right.” Alice muttered. “Katsuragi Kenji couldn’t have died off just like that. He had to think of some way to cause a bigger commotion that would delay the reconstruction. He also didn’t want others to find out his real identity, but he wants to return to the park on the Holy Night. That’s why he asked his friends to fulfil his wish, the only method he could do that was worth trying.”

Alice looked away from me, and towards Mori-san, towards the little plastic bag in his hands.

“And he did, though in the form of ashes.”

Mori-san curled his slightly blackened lips, and merely handed the bag over to us.

However, Alice shook her head.

“The ones who should accept this aren’t us.”

Alice turned her head aside, and I followed her glance. At the entrance of the park, before the stairs was a slender figure who had appeared there without us knowing. I felt my chest being suffocated for some reason. How many times does the detective have to repeat this process again? She’s only going to reveal the words of the dead when the cruel stage is set?

Yui-san approached, but I couldn’t see her expression due to her sunglasses. As usual, her hair was hidden under the kni cap, and she was dressed in a tight-fitting peacoat, her slender figure looking more helpless than usual.

I only got to see her face when she entered the area where the dim street lights shone upon her. The moist eyes were filled with scepticism, looking as though it would shatter at any given moment.

“Did you hear everything?”

The detective ask the client. Yui-san responded, but it was unclear if she was nodding or shivering due to cold.

“In that case, we are done with your request. Are you satisfied now?”

“You have to be kidding.”

Yui-san stared at the bag Mori-san was holding out.

“I-I didn’t ask for this. I said I want to meet my father. I don’t want this.”

Right, Alice. This is too much. This twist of words will only cause everyone to be hurt. Why did you have to do this? Ginji-san too. Why? Why—

“Why, papa.”

Yui-san’s voice was filled with intense anguish.

“Why? Why did you have to do this? Is this place that important? Do you really want to keep that tattered house? Why? Why? Aren’t you dead because of this? Why?”

“Right.” The detective softly answered, “It’s all because this place is his home.”

Yui-san shook her head to hold in the tears that were about to flow out, she didn’t notice the sound caused by her sunglasses falling onto the metal sheet.

Alice took the bag from Mori-san’s hands, went towards Yui-san, and grabbed her arm.

“I’m the NEET detective, speaker of the dead. I am going to convey to you the words of the dead. Follow me.”

The tent was pitch dark, chilly, with a bittersweet smell. As seen before, there ere only some futons laid out on the floor. Alice brought a completely devastated into the wide space of a place nobody would except to be a homeless’ home, and she too went in. Despite this, there was a lot of space inside.

But what was inside? Just the presence of death lingering. I stared at the opened entrance, thinking.

“What now? What’s with this place?”

Yui-san asked in an agitated manner.

“Please don’t say something stupid like I should stay here for a night to understand how papa will think.”

But the detective didn’t answer, and asked Yui-san.

“Do you know the origin of the word camera?”

Yui-san’s eyes were moist due to tears and scepticism as she stared at Alice, and I took stared at the black hair under the black veil in shock.

“Wh…at?’

“The origin of the word Camera. Camera Obscura—in Latin, it means ‘a dark house’.”

Narumi, close the entrance when you come in. I suppressed my doubt that appeared in response to Alice’s words, ducked down, and entered.

The plywood doors let out a dry sound.

However, once I did so, the room didn’t become completely dark. A strange warmth and light shone upon, so I could vaguely see Yui-san’s blushing face and Alice’s pale face. Why? Where is this light coming from?

“Look. This is what Katsuragi Kenji is trying to protect.”

Alice muttered. Her finger pointed at the floor between her and Yui-san, and I could hear Yui-san and me gasp in the darkness.

There was a light on the ground, an oval-shaped light. However, the light was clearly projecting a certain image.

“…Why…is-is that me…?”

Yui-san’s muttered landed upon her smile. That image did appear to be Yui-san; no, it definitely was her. Projected on the floor of cardboard was Natsuki Yui, singing a Christmas Carol in the middle of the snow. The singing voice should have been blocked out by the walls, yet my ears could hear that Christmas carol in my ears.

Why?

I sought for the source of the light.

There was a little hole in the cardboard wall facing the railway, and the light shone in from there. That was the only bullet hole not patched up by tape.

“Camera Obscura.” Alice again muttered, “By using a really small hole to align light into the dark room, one can clearly see a visual at the point of projection. Even the distant stars are within grasp.”

Your father has always been with you.

This was the house he finally obtained.

Alice muttered, and drips of water appeared on the cardboard floor, contorting Yui-san’s smile. I finally noticed that it was a projection of the PV of Natsuki Yui set up on the wall of the wall opposite the railway. I saw it several times, and even recalled the song; thus, I knew this song was coming to an end. The camera got closer, and I could clearly see the fluttering snowflakes. Once Yui-san was done with her singing, she closed her eyes in the midst of the melody, as though sleeping, hiding under the fur, entering a blissful dreamland. This miracle caused Ginji-san to remain here, and allowed him to return to his home through this way. It’s too much; there’s no need for the world to have such a cruel, kind and perfect miracle happen. However, I understood that miracles would happen one to anyone, just during the moments when we never realize.

“…I.”

Yui-san’s sobbing dampened the cardboard floor.

“I am here.”

I shook my head. No, I wanted to say, but even I didn’t know what I was trying to deny.

“I have been here with papa the entire time…he’s despicable.”

Yui-san put a hand on the floor, her shoulders shivering.

“You’re horrible, papa. I always wanted to be reunited with you, but you’re the only one who would say me…it’s unfair.”

The black veil shook in the corner of my eyes, and Alice appeared as though she wanted to say something, only to stop. It’s only at

such moments did I understand what Alice was getting at.

The words of the dead are simply to comfort the living. Nobody else knows what your father is thinking.

However, this beauty is real, and it's the only fact.

That's why you have to bear all of this, right?

Alice never raised any cruel scepticism to Yui-san, and merely handed the plastic bag over to her. This bag continued the ashes Mori-san handed to us. The tape sealing it was torn us, and the ashes inside the bag scattered on the floor. Suddenly, there was a flash in the ash, and it was the platinum ring that melted due to the cremation, the alphabet 'K' barely to be seen.

This was—the only thing left.

What remained of Ginji-san were only this house made of cardboard, plywood and vinyl sheets, some ash, and a melted ring.

The warmth of the memories warmed my heart, and I supposed I could finally understand Ginji-san's wishes. He wanted to protect the dream of Natsuki Yui, for it was an identity his daughter could not separate herself from. He kept seeking, feeling his blood, warmth and life, that were following through his eyes, neck, and body. He had to die as a homeless, but had to protect this home until the Holy Night, and return here again.

So he entrusted two things to his friends.

The prove that he was Katsuragi Kenji—his ring, and the head.

All the elements came together in a cruel fashion to great success, triggering the incident. The corpse lost its name, and the body left behind caused the park to be filled with the presence of death, causing everyone to leave, and protected this home as a realize. After hiding for a while, he returned to the park, had his ashes scattered on this ground as was agreed upon—the promised homeland. This was the one method worth trying that he chose.

Ginji-san, are you—

Really happy with this?

I wordlessly asked the letter 'K', these words unknowingly filled

with an equivalent amount of fury for a certain person.

He became ash, and returned to his home in this mirror-like manner, so late that almost all his memories were wiped out—but there had to be a better, better way of doing this right?

I bit my lips, and shook my head.

This was his choice, and his choice on who to hurt or protect. The job of weighing the pros and cons will be up to a certain person up there casually writing in the notebook.

We could only accept this.

I gently inserted my finger into the ash scattered around; it was neither hot nor cold.

Welcome back, Ginji-san.

And also, good night.

I pushed the plywood door aside, grabbed Alice by the hand, and pulled her out. The frostiness of December dragged us back into reality. The sounds of the train could be heard, heard, and it was probably the last ride. I guess it was already the next day, time for Jesus to be crying in the manger.

“See, that is the real miracle.”

Alice pointed at the metal fence as she muttered. I turned around, and found her pointing at the street light at the top of the tall pole. At this point, it was extinguished.

“…Street light?”

“Right. That street light isn’t in the air. When it extinguishes, it has the effect of a lens. Without that, the television visual far down the streets will never reach this dark room.”

“Heh. I see.”

I nearly let out such sarcastic words, and hurriedly covered my tracks. What Alice said next was more sarcastic than my words,

“The fire that started in summer is likely caused by that.”

"…Eh?"

"If the lens gathers all the sunlight, there should be enough heat gathered to trigger a fire. There was probably a black box or something positioned right at where the sunlight's gathered at."

"Ahh…" So that's the experiment we did for our physics classes in elementary school. These meaningless glass bits are the culprits causing the fire in this park, and also the helpers who created Ginji-san's wonderful memory.

"It's probably going to be taken down." Alice appeared to have read through my thoughts as she said this, "These lights don't go well with a sports park."

"I guess."

At this moment, a scenery appeared in my mind. Under the scorching sun would be a desert that would burn everything to the ground, living onto a street lamp in the middle.

Alice grabbed my hand, and walked away, the scenery of the desert seemingly shattering in my heart, and the white breathes of hers and mine dissipated in the air.

We passed through the forest, arriving at the center of the park, and found that Mori-san had vanished. His job was done, and there was no need for him to remain here. I started to wonder a little, what would that man do from this point? The police would probably find out about them and deliver justice. But under what charge? They were simply fulfilling what they had to do.

I sighed, and turned my back on the darkness, pulling Alice by the hand as I walked on. The detective work was completely done.

I walked out, and turned back, hearing that Christmas song again from behind the forest and the metal fence.

"We should let loose as much as we can."

Alice muttered.

"Us of no religious faith should just dump all miracles into a trashbin and enjoy ourselves all we want."

I nodded, and walked down the stairs. I got the feeling that the

world got clearer than before. In this frosty wind, Yui-san's singing voice, and even the noises from the vehicles, trains, people crossing each other at the station staircase, shop attendants trying to sell off their remaining cakes, and the hoarse voices of the drunks could be heard as clearly as a clock's second hand. All the hustle on this night felt so adorable for some reason, and it was truly a strange Holy Night.

And so, the construction of the park started soon after the new year.

I was not in the mood, so I had no interest in such news, but it appeared the students who went about shooting the homeless with their modified airguns had given up. This was trending furiously on the internet, and I couldn't ignore it completely either. Also, the guys of the Hirasaka-gumi too continued with some baseless rumors.

"Aniki flicked back a grenade with a finger flick and blew up all the enemies!"

"Aniki stuffed his hand into a rocket launcher and blew it up, and blew up all the enemies!"

"Aniki directed a missile with a little blow, and blew up all the enemies!"

Those Hirasaka-gumi guys should just turn themselves in too, their crime being a parade of barbaric gorillas.

And behind the rumors that spread like a plague, there were many other things that weren't mentioned. Only Tetsu-senpai knew the fate that befell Mori-san and Pe-san.

"Heard that the food at the detention center is good, and they're able to spend the Winter at a place with a roof, so those guys are really happy. Good work."

Tetsu-senpai dropped by at 'Hanamaru' in January, and told me this.

"Will they be charged?" Hiro could not help but ask worriedly.

“Who knows? Probably under the crime of abandoning a corpse or damaging it or something.”

Hearing their conversation, I seemed to understand what Alice would always say, “I have no interest in criminals.” I too had no interest in them.

But Mori-san and the others merely fulfilled the wishes of their once living friend, and us detectives can only reveal and humiliate the words of the dead, yet they fulfilled it without a word. Who could reproach, judge and punish them?

The cruel incident was coupled with a cruel outcome, like snow in the desert, finally left with nothing. Thus, Ginji-san’s little hut was torn down at the end of the year, while the street lamp vanished as the construction trucks buzzed around the park.

If there was something I wanted to say that lingered in my heart, it would be the same as Alice.

Why did they have to do this—just this reason alone.

Major returned to ‘Hanamaru’ right when my winter break was about to end.

“The police abuse of authority is really, really, really violent! All the gun technology used by the history research club was taught by me, and the ways to purchase them were mostly retailers I know. I told them everything, and the investigators got really excited, so they went searching from my house to the college research room!”

Major kept devouring a large bowl of miso ramen and told us excitedly.

“Of course, I won’t keep any illegally modified weapons in places the police can find, so I was acting obedient in the interrogation room and laughing inside my stomach. Ah, right, they didn’t give me pork cutlet rice. I can have it, but I need to pay.”

Major was being so upbeat that it shocked me. It seemed Tetsu-senpai’s happy to finally have a comrade who was arrested, and after that, those two started chatting about their experiences in detention. Those two idiots.

“They’ll definitely do urine checks, and if they did it on Narumi back then, it’ll come out positive and he’ll be arrested.”

“They’ll check for tattoos too! Yondaime’s out too!”

But this was just an act, and even I could tell. Ever since that incident, Major never brought out any air guns or modified guns. In places of them was an M14 that was broken into two and placed on both sides. If anyone were to ask “What’s the matter”, he would simply answer that it’s ‘in repair’. However, I know that he always had this gun in his backpack.

Everyone has a different way of making up and forgetting their past.

Finally, I want to talk about Yui-san’s ending.

A month and a half later, the NEET detective agency received a large cardboard box directed at Fujishima Narumi, and the sender was Katsuragi Yuina.

“Why is my thing sent to you, Narumi?”

Alice was already in a bad mood, but once she took out the 4 bunny dolls, she changed her mind.

“Mmmm…these aren’t sold; they’re colored versions that haven’t been released…these definitely are prototypes, so that means she has links with the designers. Uu, I’m so envious!”

Alice embraced the 4 bunny dolls of different colors and rolled about on the bed, while I read the letter Yui-san sent to me.

“This are the bunnies I promised before. I’m really sorry to deliver it so late after I received Minveva.

I have deposited the investigation fees into your account. Please confirm.”

I’ll drop by to play next time.

“My detective agency isn’t a place to play at…but it’s rare to have a doll enthusiast I can get on with so well…mmm.”

Alice buried her face in the 4 bunnies, really bothered by this, and I couldn’t help but grin as I watched her. There were dolls, and also a CD and a letter directed at it. I started up the CD player, and read the letter to Alice.

“Thank you very much too, Narumi-kun. It’s thanks to you that my album became a bestseller. Huh? It’s weird to be thanking you for this.

To thank you, I sent the upcoming single to you, Narumi-kun. This is a song for someone very important to me, and I hope you’ll be the first to hear it, so I made it into a CD. I guess Alice-chan will be angry upon hearing this letter, so please don’t let her see this letter.”

…Eh? But I just read it to her.

“W-wh-wh-what’s with this letter!?”

Alice tossed aside the bunnies and leapt at me, pulling the letter from me. After reading it, she blushed.

“Wh-what’s with this!? You laid your hand on a woman using your duty as an excuse, y-you shameless fellow!”

“No I didn’t! Calm down. Just listen to the song and you’ll understand!”

Argh seriously, why write such a vague letter? Alice threw a bunch of empty Dr. Pepper cans, causing me to escape from the office, sit at the emergency stairs, and put the earphones into my ears. An untimely bell chime echoed in this clear frosty sky of January, and after that, Yui-san’s singing voice began with a guitar riff.

It was another Christmas song, one that was a month late.

That single would be officially released on January 24th. I saw it on a news website.

When Yui-san was interviewed, naturally, she was asked why she came up with a Christmas song again, and she answered,

“It’s a very personal song.”

“I really wanted to release this single, so I pestered the manager and begged the producer, before finally releasing it as a limited single on the internet. Yes, I did the lyrics.”

“I promised that person that I’ll meet on Christmas.”

“It’s a man. Rest is secret (laughs)”

“This promise happened a long time back, back when I was in elementary school. Right, so everyone, please relax (laughts)”

“I waited so long, so long that even I was shouting. I can’t wait any more!”

“So in response, I decided to delay my Christmas gift by a month. Yaah! This is payback!”

The song title is “I’m here”.

This single’s way better than the Christmas song last December. Even though Christmas was long over, there were times where I would take it out to hear. A person’s way of laughing, crying, and wiping their tears really differs from person to person.

＜End＞

Afterword

That winter, after celebrating my 33rd birthday, I had a chat with many homeless folk.

I live in Ikebukuro, and honestly, this place is not as modernized as everyone would imagine. At the office streets to the East entrance of the train station in particular, there were no people to be seen once it was midnight. Whenever I reach a bottleneck when writing in the middle of the night, I would leave home to wander around the streets, and at this moment, all I would see were the road workers, the patrol guards, some youths practicing breakdancing and skateboarding, and old men hiding in cardboard boxes, sleeping.

“Anyway, it’s very cold.”

One of the old men said as he held onto the coffee I served him.

“The ground’s the coldest place on earth. It’s useless no matter how I paved the ground. Whenever I sleep, I feel my body warmth being sapped away, little by little.”

I tried lying on the ground after the old man left, and spaced out for a while. That night was a cold night, so frigid was stuck to the ground. I looked back, and found that there was nary a star to be seen in the Ikebukuro night. It was the 3rd Winter I spent in Ikebukuro after moving there, and never once did I look up at the sky until then.

This was how the story of the 7th volume began, and it ended at the same place. The same thing repeats itself again. Even the part about returning home was about the novel.

It has been 5 years since I started writing the ‘Kamisama no Memochou’ Series.

Lots of things were erased through these 5 years, and the park that is the setting for the 7th volume is one of them. I had an actual park as the setting, but it is no longer around, and there is none of the tent village to be seen.

When I saw the news to reconstruct the place, I had a thought that I would write a story about this part. The construction of the plot was harder to come up with, and I only managed to sort it out at the beginning of this year. I suppose some readers will understand that this is an unprecedented field from what I have written before.

While I was dragging my feet, reality overtook the pace of the novel, and it was almost exactly the moment I submitted the first manuscript that the reconstruction of the park ended. All the tent villages were torn down, concrete was paved on the floor, and there were a futsal court, a skating pit, and a rock climbing wall. The landscape was completely toppled, and the past scenery nowhere to be seen.

Only the name of the park remains till this day.

It just so happened that it was the same as the theme I repeatedly emphasized in this series, and it really was a peculiar feeling. Perhaps I was attracted to the park because it was the kind of ending I hoped for. However, the real world is not as romantic as how it is in novels.

The 7th volume depicts a story of people who lost their ‘homes’, and the home I was born in vanished during those 5 years.

I was born and raised in a in a town south of Tama, and my house was by the cliff. My parents moved away from there a few years back, and sold the house along with the land.

The transportation at that quiet town was really inconvenient. I suppose only those nothing better to do would want to develop for place, and wondered if the hills at the back, farming fields and houses remained the same as before. A while back, I had such thoughts as I returned back to my hometown, and found the scenery had changed. The road I had to pass through when I was in elementary school was once a dim, long, narrow slope, and it’s currently built as concrete stairs. The bamboo field I once used as a secret base was completely levelled, and the pumpkin field became houses. The house I once lived at was divided into two plots of land, two brand new terrace houses side by side. The Lily Tree where with snakes and stray cats played at vanished without a trace.

Taken aback I was, on a second thought, it was to be expected. For

those who never went back, buildings themselves could never last forever. Only when humans and buildings coexist together can there be a complete family.

However, I did not feel lonely. The house vanished, but my hometown never did. My heart shall always treasure the vibrant summer scenery of those years.

The place I should return to would obviously be the path leading home, however, that road was a little longer than it was during my childhood, reaching all the way back to Ikebukuro. That was simply it however.

Recently, I have been changing my memories and insisting that I grew up in the city! I never went out from the Yamanote Line! So I insist, and I don't have any feelings for my hometown, I guess. I shall reflect on that a little.

As this volume is released, the TV animation should be airing now. Please enjoy these works together. It is thanks to the editor-in-charge Yuasa-sama and the illustrator Kishida Mel-sama and everyone's assistance that the world of this work is able to expand till this point. I am really grateful. Really, thank you everyone.

May 2011, Sugii Hikaru

References

1. ↑ The Creation, an Oratario by the Austrian composer Joseph Haydn
2. ↑ the first Shinto shrine visit of the Japanese New Year
3. ↑ Pooping in kanji is 大便, taiben, while 代弁者, taibensha, is more as a ‘messenger’, but given that Alice’s role is basically ‘Speaker of the Dead’ by Orson Scott Wells…
4. ↑ Woman: 女, chaos (or raping): 姦)
5. ↑ By Vivaldi, of course
6. ↑ Baseball team
7. ↑ Located near Kobe
8. ↑ A Japanese TV celebrity
9. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waratte_Iitomo!
10. ↑ A long running show hosted by Kuroyanagi Tetsuko, an esteemed actress. Think of it as a Japanese version of Oprah.r
11. ↑ In context, the minimum wage in Japan back in 2010 was 713 Yen
12. ↑ Johnny and Associates is a Japanese talent agency for male entertainers

Kamisama no Memochou - Volume 07

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